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Displacement and Belonging: Redefining 'Homeland' and 'Return' among Crimean Tatars

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Abstract

This article examines Crimean Tatar perceptions of 'homeland' and 'return' following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, contrasting these views with those of Crimean Tatars in exile after the 1944 deportation. I argue that while nearly all aspects of homeland perception among exiled Crimean Tatars – such as an identity marker, a mythologized final destination, and the place where their community reside – are still evident in the narratives of those displaced after 2014, their emphasis and meaning have shifted. For those displaced post-2014, Crimea is primarily viewed as the place where their community lives and where most aspire to return. This article is based on interviews with Crimean Tatar internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine and forced migrants abroad, contributing to broader discussions on agency, displacement and belonging.

Keywords: *Crimean Tatars; homeland; belonging; displacement; return*

Introduction

For several decades, researchers have focused on the Crimean Tatars' sense of belonging and attachment to their homeland, primarily in the context of their struggle to return from the places of deportation in 1944. Around 200,000 Crimean Tatars were forcibly relocated from Crimea to Central Asia and other regions of the USSR during this period. Estimates suggest that between 27% and 46% of them perished from hunger and disease within the first three years of exile (Uehling, 2004, p. 38). Crimean Tatars were prohibited from returning to their homeland until 1989, fuelling a deep sense of attachment to Crimea transmitted through generations and sparking the development of a national movement advocating for their return. Around 300,000 Crimean Tatars repatriated to their homeland and became part of the complex economic, political, and cultural integration processes in post-Soviet Crimea (Bilukha et al., 1999; OSCE HCNM, 2013). This mass return after nearly half a century of exile stands as one of the most unique phenomena in the history of the world's forced displaced communities.

Recently, the issue of Crimean Tatars' belonging and attachment to their homeland has resurfaced, this time in relation to their forced displacement following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This displacement occurred in two waves. The first wave followed the annexation, when approximately 20,000 Crimean Tatars, driven by concerns for their safety and the preservation of their cultural identity, relocated to mainland Ukraine and became internally displaced persons (Ukrainskaya Pravda, 2017). The second wave of displacement occurred in 2022, following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the imposition of military conscription in Crimea. Around 10,000 Crimean Tatars fled to Turkey, European Union countries, the United States, and Canada (Council of Europe, 2023, p. 24), joining some internally displaced persons from mainland Ukraine who were displaced for a second time.

There is growing academic interest in the post-2014 displacement of Crimean Tatars, as reflected in various research projects and publications. Most studies (Aydin, 2024; Charron, 2022; Muratova, 2017; Sereda, 2020, 2023; Uehling, 2017, 2023) focus on displacement trajectories, the governance of minority displacement, and the sense of belonging. This article builds on existing scholarship by exploring the perceptions of homeland and return among Crimean Tatars who were forced to leave Crimea following its annexation by Russia in 2014. It seeks to integrate studies from both the post-deportation period and the post-2014 era, comparing perceptions of the homeland and return across these two periods.

The article is based on empirical research conducted by the author among Crimean Tatar internally displaced persons (IDPs) and forced emigrants from April to August 2024. The study involved 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews: 15 face-to-face interviews with Crimean Tatar IDPs in Kyiv, and 15 interviews conducted both face-to-face and online with forced migrants in Turkey, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Due to the lack of reliable data on the demographic characteristics of Crimean Tatar IDPs and forced migrants, obtaining a representative sample was not feasible. Instead, I sought to capture a diverse range of perspectives by considering factors such as age, gender, and occupation. To achieve this, I employed various non-random sampling methods, including opportunistic sampling at gatherings and targeted recruitment of prominent members of the Crimean Tatar IDP community in Kyiv. As a member of the Crimean Tatar community and someone personally acquainted with many of the interviewees, I had no issues with access and did not encounter any refusals to participate in interviews. At the same time, having remained in Crimea after its occupation by Russia, I was often perceived by people in mainland Ukraine as a ‘person from Crimea’. This perception allowed me to adopt the tactic of being an outsider, enabling me to ask questions from the perspective of someone external to their situation. Among other questions, respondents were asked about their reasons for leaving Crimea, their reflections on the decision to leave after time away, their adaptation to new places of residence, and their future plans. The collected narratives were analysed using thematic analysis and, for security reasons, are presented in anonymised form.

1. Crimean Tatar attachment to homeland

Place attachment, the emotional and cognitive connection individuals and groups form with meaningful environments (Scannell & Gifford, 2009), has garnered significant scientific interest in recent decades (Deutsch, 2005; Giuliani, 2003; Giuliani, Ferrara, & Barabotti, 2003; Gustafson, 2001; Fullilove, 1996). Scholars from various disciplines have developed distinct frameworks to examine the processes, locations, and people involved in the formation of person–place bonds. Place attachment is studied at both individual and group levels, often with some overlap. At the individual level, it refers to a person’s personal connection to a place (Manzo, 2005). Scholars seek to understand how individuals develop an attachment to a particular place, fostering a sense of ‘place-belongingness’, where the place is perceived as ‘home’ and ‘to belong’ means finding a place where one can feel ‘at home’ (Antonsich, 2010, p. 646). At the group level, attachment encompasses the shared symbolic meanings of a place

among members (Low, 1992), where they may engage in practices that help preserve their cultural identity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

Antonsich (2010, pp. 647-648) summarized factors that shape individual feelings of place-belongingness. *Autobiographical factors* stem from an individual's personal history, including experiences, relationships, and memories that create a connection to a specific place. *Relational factors* involve the social and personal ties that enrich life in a particular location, ranging from deep emotional bonds with family and friends to casual interactions with strangers in shared public spaces. Among *cultural factors*, language stands out as particularly significant, representing a unique way of constructing and interpreting meaning, as well as tacit codes, signs, and gestures shared within a common semiotic framework. Antonsich also emphasized the importance of *economic factors*, such as secure and stable living conditions for individuals and their families, and *legal factors*, including citizenship and residency permits, as essential elements in cultivating a sense of belonging.

Place attachment has also been central to understanding the Crimean Tatars' identity and sense of belonging over the past several decades. It is evident both in studies of the Crimean Tatars' struggle to return to Crimea from exile following the 1944 deportation (Aydingün & Yıldırım, 2010; Kisly, 2024; Uehling, 2001, 2004; Williams, 1997) and in works on those displaced after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Charron, 2022; Sereda, 2023). As noted by one of the pioneers in empirical study of Crimean Tatar attachment to Crimea, Brian Glyn Williams (1997, p. 240), "there can be little doubt that the idea of homeland was the dominant stimulus in Crimean Tatar communal activity during the exile period" and largely urbanized and secular Crimean Tatar deportees had instinctively rallied around the concept of their national homeland to preserve their distinct ethno-national identity.

Another well-known researcher of the Crimean Tatar attachment to homeland, Greta Uehling, wrote in her influential work *Beyond Memory* that it is not so much the 'myth of return' but rather the 'myth of home' that is crucial for understanding the Crimean Tatars' connection to Crimea. She argues that "it is home that has been mythologized: what has been lost is reconstructed in an idealized form. It is hoped that, through return, home can be restored both materially and symbolically" (Uehling, 2004, p. 5-6). Uehling suggests that the Crimean Tatars' attachment to their homeland should not be seen as a dysfunctional expression of ethnonationalism but as a thoroughly modern response to evolving relationships with place. She emphasizes that since their repatriation to Crimea, the Crimean Tatars have been engaged in processes of de- and reterritorialization, as well as in debates about history, politics, and law that have accompanied these processes:

Competing interpretations of the past emerge in debates about who lived where and when; in the legislative manipulation of who is a citizen and who is not; in struggles over property rights; and in discussions about removing the historical monuments left from the Soviet period (Uehling, 2004, p. 16).

Ayşegül Aydıngün and Erdoğan Yıldırım (2010), in contrast, viewed the Crimean Tatars' perception of homeland primarily through the lens of ethnonationalism, arguing that attachment to Crimea was a key factor in preserving their national identity in exile. They expanded on the concept of homeland as a place that shapes people's attachments, stating that homeland is not just any land, but "a construction of a 'home' on a specific territory where both the group and its members develop their primary identification in reference to their ethnicity, which requires a spatial as well as a temporal dimension, creating the group's history" (Aydıngün & Yıldırım, 2010, p. 21). Authors contend that a land transformed into a home should be a place where members can feel secure in a familiar and cherished environment. In their field research among Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Crimea, they identified four layers of the Crimean Tatars' perception of homeland: as an essential marker of identity, as an idealized mythical final destination, as a land where the community resides, and as a rationally designed place in search of a better life. The authors suggest that these layers may coexist in individual experiences.

Concepts of place and belonging continued to shape scholarship on the Crimean Tatars' attachment to homeland following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Austin Charron (2022) highlights that, in the extensive literature on place attachment, the focus is typically on smaller places – such as home, a neighbourhood, or a city. However, in regions that have acquired strong nationalistic meaning for historical reasons, as a larger category of place, the region itself also plays a significant role (Charron, 2022, p. 86). According to Charron, this helps explain the strong attachment to Crimea felt by the Crimean Tatars and representatives of other ethnic groups forced to leave the region after 2014. He suggests that the specific features of Crimeans' attachment can be understood through the lens of indigeneity, noting that indigenous and non-indigenous identities foster different relationships with place (Charron, 2022, p. 88). The author also emphasizes the importance of collective memory and intergenerational narratives about past forced relocations when analysing the particularities of Crimeans' attachment to Crimea. Charron's (2022, p. 87) fieldwork suggests that while Slavic Crimeans' connection to Crimea is largely individualistic and centred around a deep appreciation for the

region's natural environment, Crimean Tatars maintain an intergenerational narrative of national belonging, shaped by earlier periods of displacement, and which continues to inform their strong attachment to Crimea even after their displacement to mainland Ukraine.

In her research on internally displaced persons, Viktoria Sereda (2023, p. 4) argues that the concept of belonging “better conveys the relationship of the individual with society, as it includes not only interactions with groups or individuals but also with spaces and cultures, viewing people as active participants in society”. When examining the specific sense of belonging among various groups from Crimea who became IDPs in mainland Ukraine, Sereda, like Charron, emphasizes the role of collective memory and victimhood narratives that shape the Crimean Tatars' sense of belonging. She argued that in the narratives of Crimean Tatar IDPs, their sense of belonging is deeply rooted in both locality and ethnicity; they offer a rich, structured historical narrative, highlighting detailed descriptions of Crimean Tatar places, symbolic sites along the Black Sea, and significant historical events (Sereda, 2023, pp. 50-51). Sereda's study (2023, pp. 61-62) shows that Crimean Tatars' narratives structure “their sense of belonging around the feeling of symbolic trauma (the 1944 deportation), where other reference points from the past (the seizure of Crimea by Catherine II) or present (the annexation of Crimea in March 2014) are incorporated”.

This article builds on the longstanding concept of place attachment that has shaped scholarship on Crimean Tatars for decades. It complements the research trajectory established by Charron and Sereda, which emphasizes collective memory and indigeneity to explore the role of place and belonging among Crimean Tatars. Furthermore, it extends this research by comparing these narratives with those from the post-deportation period, as collected and analysed by scholars conducting fieldwork among Crimean Tatars in Central Asia. In addition to examining the narratives of IDPs on mainland Ukraine, this article incorporates the experiences of Crimean Tatars who emigrated to EU countries, Turkey, and the United Kingdom following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This expanded scope enables a comparative spatial and temporal analysis of Crimean Tatar place attachment. In the following sections, I will utilize the layers of homeland perception introduced by Aydingün and Yıldırım (2010) to demonstrate how these perceptions have evolved over time.

2. Homeland as a marker of identity

There is a consensus among scholars who have studied the return of Crimean Tatars to their homeland that their attachment to Crimea, formed through the transgenerational transmission

of knowledge about the deportation and their past life in Crimea, was the key factor preventing their assimilation and preserving their national identity in exile. Aydingün and Yıldırım (2010, p. 25) echoed a perspective commonly highlighted by other scholars:

Crimean Tatars transmitted to the next generations their experience of deportation, their perception and feelings about Crimea, their memories of life in Crimea together with their knowledge of the imagined golden past when Crimean Tatars constituted the majority of the population in Crimea. Thus, Crimean Tatars developed a strong attachment to Crimea, which began to be perceived as the cradle of their identity.

The collective memory of the lost homeland, transmitted through talks, texts, and other social practices within family, through interactions with peers, mentors, and participation in the national movement's activities, formed a sense of belonging "that was charged enough to make the Crimean Tatars believe they were linked to one another and the land" (Uehling, 2004, p. 8). Uehling noted that the Crimean Tatars' sense of homeland is more than only a feeling. It is a unique way of viewing the world, which "is not just deep, private, and individual, but public and learned" (Uehling, 2004, p. 14). She believes that otherwise, it is unlikely that second- and third-generation Crimean Tatars would experience the same feelings and describe them with the same or even greater intensity as their parents.

In other words, the memory of the lost homeland is important, but so are the mechanisms for transmitting this memory, which are linked not only to family but also to social practices in the public sphere. This public sphere included even those Crimean Tatars whose families preferred not to discuss the tragedy of deportation and the loss of Crimea. In places of exile, one of the public spaces where the memory of Crimea was visually present was cemeteries. Uehling notes the remarkable creativity of the Crimean Tatars in using tombstones to reference Crimea under conditions when it was prohibited:

In spite of the ban on mentioning Crimea, the Crimean Tatars had ordered the villages, towns and oblasts (provinces or regions) where they had been born to be inscribed on their headstones... Not only were the villages they loved named, but often there were very beautiful poems about the beauty of nature in Crimea or aphorisms about life in Crimean Tatar (Uehling, 2001, pp. 399-401).

Researchers have emphasized the crucial importance of the transgenerational transmission of memory about the homeland among the Crimean Tatars in exile, which kept it alive and was “passed to younger generations who had never seen it for themselves, creating an ‘intergenerational narrative’ of homeland and trauma from its deprivation” (Charron, 2022, p. 93). The effectiveness of this transmission was evident in the fact that Crimean Tatar children, born in Central Asia and who had never seen Crimea, often had very detailed “mental maps of their homeland”. Williams (1997, p. 240) encountered interesting cases of a learned sense of homeland among Crimean Tatars during his fieldwork:

One Tatar who was two years old during the deportation claimed, ‘Every Crimean Tatar child had it drummed into his head that he had a homeland.’ Another exile explained the importance of Crimea in nationalistic terms, saying, ‘Most children say “mama” or “papa” as their first word. Our children said “Kyrym”, the word for Crimea’.

Scholars agree that the attachment to Crimea and the preservation of national identity among the Crimean Tatars occurred despite the policy of the Soviet authorities, which for a long time denied them the right to their homeland:

By denying the legitimacy of the Crimean Tatars’ claims to the Crimea and refusing to acknowledge the existence of their separate national identity, Soviet authorities may have actually strengthened this people’s attachment to their land and their nation. A nation of activists was in fact created by the Kremlin’s attempts to erase an entire people and deprive them of their territory (Williams, 1997, p. 241).

Due to their resistance to official Soviet narratives and the successful transgenerational transmission of memories about Crimea in exile, attachment to the homeland became seen by Crimean Tatars as a fundamental part of their identity, something deeply ingrained, as if passed down through ‘mother’s milk’ or ‘blood’.

Attachment to Crimea is a prominent theme in the narratives of Crimean Tatars who were forced to leave the region after 2014. Much like in the post-deportation period, this attachment is seen as a crucial, and sometimes essential, marker of Crimean Tatar identity and worldview. Some interviewees acknowledged that this attachment is not always easy to rationalize. As one middle-aged male migrant from Germany noted, “it is a subject for future studies by neurobiologists”. In Charron’s study (2022, p. 96), several Crimean Tatar IDPs

conceptually evoked ‘mother’s milk’ as an intergenerational vector of inherited attachment to Crimea: “We consider this a real homeland, where we were born and where we lived. And our parents consider this their homeland because it was passed to them through their mothers’ milk”.

Some respondents believed that the Crimean Tatars’ special attachment to homeland is better seen through contrasts with other ethnic groups from the region:

For Russians, it’s just a naval base, another piece of territory. For Ukraine, it’s also just a territory. They lost their property in Crimea, but they will manage... When we return to Crimea, for some it will be an opportunity to make money, but for me, it’s about development. I’m ready to clean springs in Crimea, to contribute to the public good. Others might not be so sure; perhaps this will set me apart from non-Crimean Tatars. A Crimean Tatar is simply ready to kiss the land, to put it in order, improve it, and develop it (man, 33, Kyiv).

Based on observations and interviews with displaced Crimean Tatars, attachment to Crimea alone does not appear sufficient to serve as a strong tool for preserving their cultural identity. This can be attributed to generational differences among displaced persons. Post-2014 IDPs and forced migrants are typically third- and fourth-generation survivors of deportation and often have a limited command of their native language. It was the first generation – bearers of the Crimean Tatar language and cultural codes – that played a crucial role in preserving Crimean Tatar identity during the post-1944 exile. Their efforts to transmit knowledge about pre-1944 Crimea and the deportation, while maintaining the Crimean Tatar language as the primary means of family communication, were essential to safeguarding the community’s identity despite the challenges posed by Soviet unification and Russification policies. With the natural passing of the first generation of deportation survivors and the increasing number of Crimean Tatars educated and socialized under the Soviet system, assimilation processes within the community became widespread. In post-Soviet Crimea, assimilation was among the most discussed issues in the public sphere (Kouts & Muratova, 2014). This topic continues to shape Crimean Tatar discourse both within and beyond Crimea after 2014. While assimilation in occupied Crimea is often seen as occurring within a Russian-speaking environment, Crimean Tatars who relocated to mainland Ukraine face assimilation within a Ukrainian cultural context. The key difference between those who remained in Crimea and those who relocated after 2014 lies in their respective environments. Those who stayed in Crimea still reside in areas with

compact Crimean Tatar settlements, where they have more opportunities to use their cultural codes in daily interactions, thereby preserving their cultural identity more effectively.

In interviews, Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014 frequently emphasized the challenges of maintaining their cultural identity while being separated from their homeland. This concern was most often expressed by IDPs in mainland Ukraine, which is understandable given their prolonged stay in a different cultural environment. Some began their reflections on the state of Crimean Tatar identity ‘in exile’ by noting that the absence of a ‘native land’ deprives this identity of the space that nurtures it and provides the energy necessary for the development and full self-realization of the Crimean Tatars. This land is perceived as an environment filled with loved ones, familiar landscapes, and communication networks. As one IDP noted, living away from the homeland prevents him from experiencing complete happiness:

That attachment, the nerve endings that the Crimean land gives, without which there is almost a kind of bloodlessness now... Even in the happiest moment, I realize that I cannot be completely happy. Because I don't have what gives this integral part of happiness, I don't have my environment and, no matter how archaic it may sound now, I don't have my land... the surrounding environment, where there are people, familiar things, and nature, and all of this is absent (man, 35, Kyiv).

Life away from the homeland was directly linked to the perceived cultural assimilation of the Crimean Tatars. Reflections on this topic were often tinged with a sense of hopelessness:

“Assimilation is happening, yes, Crimean Tatars are assimilating. And it's a process, you know, that's inevitable, I would say. Whether we want it or not, it's happening and will continue to happen. We need to accept it as a given fact” (man, 44, Kyiv).

Assimilation was typically associated with the loss of the native language, interethnic marriages, and the replacement of Crimean Tatar cultural codes with Ukrainian ones. Some respondents lamented the lack of systematic efforts in teaching and studying the Crimean Tatar language on mainland Ukraine. According to them, this process still relies on individual initiatives launched in 2014, but it has not yet evolved into an established system that could create a healthy ‘ecosystem’ for the preservation and development of the Crimean Tatar

language. At the same time, some IDPs noted the enthusiasm and efforts of individual parents in fostering native language skills in their children:

I've increasingly noticed that where children are being born on mainland Ukraine, people are trying to speak the Crimean Tatar language, seeking out audiovisual resources to raise their children or show them something in the Crimean Tatar language. Or they're trying to create something themselves (man, 29, Kyiv).

According to other IDPs, Crimean Tatars in mainland Ukraine prefer to speak Ukrainian and English, while they do not see the need to use their native language:

"I can count on my fingers our leaders who, despite their positions, speak Crimean Tatar well. And why? Because they don't consider it necessary. It's much more important to know Ukrainian and English. English is a green light to Europe and America" (woman, 48, Kyiv).

The assimilation in foreign cultural environments also concerns some Crimean Tatars living in Western countries, although to a somewhat lesser extent compared to IDPs on mainland Ukraine. It is possible that the time since their relocation has not yet been sufficient for them to fully grasp the scale of the potential consequences for preserving cultural identity. At the same time, some respondents already see threats to the younger generation:

"We are scattered all over the world, and our children who live here speak a Russian-German pidgin. In Germany, the integration process, especially for children, is very well-established, leading to them becoming simply Germans, lost. Our prospects are very bleak" (man, 29, Germany).

According to the Crimean Tatars interviewed in Europe, children already use languages other than Crimean Tatar in communication with each other:

I have children who are students, and I was shocked to find that they already speak to each other in German, English, Polish, and Ukrainian. It's unlikely that Crimean Tatar will be a unifying language for them all. Before, our children spoke Crimean Tatar and Russian, but now I know children who speak different languages. So, language is no longer something that can unite us (woman, 30, Ireland).

To combat assimilation, Crimean Tatars have established various cultural centres in their new places of residence and initiatives that emphasize their ethnic, cultural, and religious distinctiveness from the local population, as well as from other IDPs and migrants. For instance, Sereda noted that Crimean Tatars “employ various methods – such as commemorations, workshops, theatrical performances, and social media platforms – to promote Crimean Tatar culture and heritage” (Sereda, 2023, p. 51). However, as the interviews revealed, this was not enough to prevent assimilation.

3. Homeland as an idealized mythical final destination

In the places of exile, the perception of Crimea as the historical homeland became mythologized, acquiring characteristics of a sacred territory that, despite the distance, connected the land with its people. The existing prohibition on returning to Crimea contributed significantly to this process:

The fact that Crimea was a forbidden place for Crimean Tatars between 1944 and 1989 further contributed to the strengthening of the feeling of attachment to homeland through myth-making because the homeland emerged in the minds of those deported and their offspring as an unreachable and beautiful place surrounded by the mysterious atmosphere of the myth (Aydingün & Yıldırım, 2010, p. 28).

Crimean Tatars in exile often idealized Crimea’s pre-1944 past as a ‘golden age’, despite such catastrophes as the famine of 1921–1923, collectivization, and the Second World War (Kisly, 2024, p. 115). They attributed special qualities to Crimea’s geography, nature, abandoned homes, gardens, and traditional food. Aydingün and Yıldırım observed similar patterns in their study, noting the use of emotional language, the dramatization of positive memories, and the idealization of the homeland’s beauty. They highlighted the excessive emphasis on Crimea’s uniqueness in these narratives, stating that this “contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of attachment to the land and the connection between this land, blood, and roots” (Aydingün & Yıldırım, 2010, p. 30). As a result, for Crimean Tatars dispersed across various Soviet republics and regions, socialized in different environments, and even those who had partly lost their native language, the mythologized image of Crimea as their sole homeland became the central marker of their identity as Crimean Tatars. While the mythologization of a lost homeland is common among displaced communities around the world, the specificity of the Crimean Tatars lies in the transformation of their dramatic experience into a ‘chosen

trauma'. This contrasts with other communities "that suffered from similar persecutions, but tend to conceal or rather forget their painful experience" (Kisly, 2024, p. 117). Thus "the myth of homeland is constructed, and the return myth is kept alive to preserve national identity and mobilize people for a permanent return to the homeland when the right time comes" (Aydingün & Yıldırım, 2010, p. 37).

Williams (1999, p. 246) also observed the myth-making processes surrounding Crimea, noting that the region has been presented by the Crimean Tatars and the Western press as "La Terre Promise". He argued that, in many respects, Crimea serves as the Crimean Tatar nation's Promised Land – a land promised to them both by the nationality-based Soviet system and through a century of exposure to Western-style nationalism (Williams, 1997, pp. 246-247). As a result, the Crimean Peninsula remained a central point of attraction for much of the Crimean Tatar population living in Central Asia, a sentiment reinforced by Crimea's unique geography – a distinctly defined, compact peninsula that is easily visualized in the popular imagination (Williams, 1997, p. 248).

The clash between mythologized perceptions and reality often leads to disappointment and disillusionment, as observed in other displaced communities around the world. Hammer (2005, pp. 52-53) discusses the frustration and disappointment experienced by the second and third generations of Palestinians. Their perceptions of the homeland were shaped by their parents' stories, art, and media and their dreams and expectations were left unfulfilled upon arriving in Palestine in the 1990s. This also happened to many Crimean Tatars after repatriation to their homeland. Their abstract, inexperienced ideas about Crimea and their future life there collided with a harsh reality, filled with socio-economic challenges. The strain of seeking employment, housing, education, and healthcare in a land where they were often unwelcome has undoubtedly weighed heavily on this resilient community:

Crimean Tatar returnees are frequently disillusioned when their romantic mental maps of the peninsula are dispelled by the harsh realities of their situation. Tatars who dreamed of living in the white washed stone cottages built by their forebears along the coast find themselves living in poorly constructed hovels without heating or water, located on muddy patches of unwanted land or crammed into dilapidated, Brezhnev era, pre-fab concrete apartment buildings that encircle the suburbs of the Crimea's major cities (Williams, 1997, p. 248).

The certain mythologization of Crimea is also evident among Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014. Many are unable to visit or return due to security concerns, which has once again

transformed Crimea into a ‘forbidden place,’ creating fertile ground for new myth-making. For those who have lived in mainland Ukraine for over a decade, this often takes the form of idealizing their pre-2014 life in Crimea and constructing a myth of a ‘happy life’ there. In interviews, they recalled political and cultural events they frequently attended (such as the mourning rally on the Day of Deportation and Hıdırlez), regular gatherings with neighbours and friends, and the shared empowerment and joy of being together in their homeland:

I remember 2013 and think back to Hıdırlez. For me, it’s like a dramatic movie that starts with everything being great, everyone having fun. That’s exactly how that Hıdırlez in Bakhchisaray felt – Jamala came, everyone was happy. I asked everyone, and they all said yes, [we are happy], and I felt so happy myself. But then something grey appeared, and the Game of Thrones began – it’s like it was written about us (man, 29, Germany).

Some interviewees admitted that they seek traces of Crimea in their surroundings and even dream about it: “You see Crimea everywhere, even in places where it technically can’t be. You see familiar places everywhere, you miss it so much that it appears in your dreams” (man, 29, Germany). Similar findings appear in Charron’s study, where a male IDP in his 40s also shared that he dreams about Crimea:

I’ve been dreaming about [Crimea] lately. I dream about the White Cliff, where I have been to the very top, where I explored all the caves. I dream about Demerdzhi Mountain as I approach the sea, I dream about everything connected with this. I dream about my trees that grow in my courtyard, the grape vines, and this is all intermixed with the fact that it’s connected to my grandmother and grandfather (Charron, 2022, p. 96).

At the same time, the idealization of Crimea among displaced Crimean Tatars after 2014 differs from that developed among those exiled after the deportation. For the second and third generations of exiled Crimean Tatars, memories of Crimea were primarily collective and ‘inherited’ rather than rooted in personal experience, leading to a more abstract and sometimes romanticized view of the homeland, where elements like air, water, milk, or fruit were ascribed exceptional qualities.

In contrast, the perceptions of Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014, and especially after 2022, are grounded in their lived experiences and personal memories, through which they create place meaning and connect it to themselves. Their attachment to Crimea is based on

individually, rather than collectively, held meanings (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 2). While some negative memories are overshadowed by positive images, and an idealized view of pre-2014 life in Crimea persists, there is also critical reflection on past relations with Ukrainian authorities and the local population:

I felt like a representative of a people that had always been oppressed and had to wait for someone's approval. Many people feel nostalgic about Ukraine, but as an entrepreneur and public figure, I didn't sense much love for us from Ukrainians – neither as an ethnic group nor as residents of Ukraine. I encountered certain contradictions and a lack of acceptance of our history (man, 43, Turkey).

In the interviews, many expressed regret that the Crimean Tatars were unable to fully achieve their aspirations as the indigenous people of Crimea and realize collective rights:

We often don't talk about it – it wasn't all that rosy for us either. Though I think it should be said. For example, within the framework of the 'Qırım İçün' exhibition, I talk about the period of return. I talk about how no one in Crimea was waiting for the Crimean Tatars, neither before 1991 nor after 1991. Every step we had to fight for ourselves – every school, it was a struggle. No one gave us anything (woman, 35, Kyiv).

4. Homeland as a place where community lives

After the start of the mass repatriation of Crimean Tatars to their homeland in the late 1980s, a new layer of homeland perception emerged for many of those who remained in exile and, for various reasons, could not return. This shift was tied to the significance of familial and communal ties in the Crimean Tatar value system. As Aydıngün and Yıldırım (2010, p. 33) observed, Crimean Tatars often perceive their entire community as an extended family. Therefore, the division between those who returned and those who stayed behind was felt as a family separation. In contrast, the reunification of the people on their native land was seen as a family reunion:

For the Crimean Tatars still living in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, one of the driving forces behind the desire to return to homeland is to follow the community to maintain their social relationships with community members as the basis of communal solidarity. In other words, for them, returning to homeland acquires a new meaning [...] now it turns out to be a place where one can live with people like himself or herself (Aydıngün & Yıldırım, 2010, p. 35).

Many Crimean Tatars who remained in exile reacted painfully to attempts to contrast their perception of the homeland with that of those who returned to Crimea, and to explain their inability to return as a lack of patriotism. Uehling (2001) writes about an interesting experience communicating with Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan, who invoked the ‘voices of the dead’ to affirm the strong patriotic sentiments still present among those who remained in Central Asia. She emphasizes that for the diasporic Crimean Tatar community, this serves as a reaffirmation of their collective identity, now fragmented across new state borders. In this context, the voices of the deceased play a crucial role in reshaping Crimean Tatar identity both spatially and temporally in the post-Soviet era:

The deceased are prominent on a substantive level in this society in which kin are absolutely central to the organization of social life. They are distinctly ‘present’ in informants’ thinking, reasoning and strategizing about their lives: second-generation Tatars (born in diaspora) often decide to stay in Uzbekistan or alternatively repatriate to Crimea, based on living parents’ needs and deceased parents’ wishes (Uehling, 2001, p. 392).

For Crimean Tatars displaced since 2014, their homeland, beyond being a marker of identity and a mythologized final destination, is primarily seen as the place where their community resides. Unlike the post-deportation era, when the community moved to Crimea while individuals stayed in Central Asia, the community now remains in Crimea while individuals have been forced to move away. This creates the perception of returning not to a historical homeland, but to home – where your people live and where you yourself lived not so long ago. Attachment to a place is often closely linked to attachment to the people who live there and the social interactions the place facilitates. Lalli (1992) suggests that spatial bonds are significant primarily because they represent social connections. Therefore, place attachment involves not only ties to the individuals with whom people interact in that space, but also to the social group the place embodies (Scannell & Gifford, 2009, p. 5). In this context, belonging to a place becomes one and the same as belonging to a group of people, i.e. belonging becomes synonymous with identity, both social and individual (Antonsich, 2010, p. 649).

In interviews, IDPs and migrants often expressed a deep longing for the Crimean Tatar environment – the language, people, and national symbols that were once part of their everyday lives. Many respondents noted that they had not fully appreciated these aspects of their culture until they were no longer surrounded by them. They expressed a particular sense of loss for

things like stores with signs in Crimean Tatar and for the vendors and neighbours with whom they could casually converse in their native language, thus confirming the importance of cultural and relational factors in shaping their place-belonginess (Antonsich, 2010, pp. 647-648):

For me personally, it's important to communicate in everyday life in Crimean Tatar and no other language. It irritates me when Crimean Tatars use any language other than Crimean Tatar with each other, including at the national level. The territory of Crimea, its climate, and the nationality that has developed there are all important to me (man, 47, Germany).

Some Crimean Tatars on mainland Ukraine admitted that to meet, communicate, and experience the Crimean Tatar environment, they must make special efforts which prove to be quite challenging given their busy schedules and pace of life:

I miss the ease and spontaneity. On the mainland, relationships among Crimean Tatars are often determined by certain topics. To connect, we usually need a subject, a project, or a reason – something that drives us to seek each other out, meet, and discuss it. And that is normal; it is not problematic. It's a productive format... But it lacks ease. There is a sense that each time, you need to invest a certain amount of effort to make it happen. Otherwise, you won't run into Crimean Tatars, or you will miss it greatly (man, 38, Kyiv).

Others admitted that, despite their efforts to recreate the cultural environment and familiar way of life in their current places of residence, they are unable to fully achieve this. The Crimean experience of communication, even among relatives, cannot be automatically reproduced; instead, interactions are based on different topics and within different frameworks:

Even when we gather in Kyiv, we all live with Crimea in our hearts; we all want to go home. It's not like when we gather in Crimea. We cannot sing songs or recite poems the way we used to in Crimea. We just gather and talk about politics, analyze what was said, and how it might contribute to our quicker return home... And we want to return to our environment, where we speak our native language with poems and songs (woman, 37, United Kingdom).

In interviews, many respondents were particularly saddened by the inability, despite their efforts, to immerse the younger generation (their children) in the Crimean Tatar environment.

These children, according to them, are deprived of the opportunity to socialize within their native cultural context:

I love being in the Crimean Tatar environment. Here, it's absent; everyone creates it for themselves, but it's a microenvironment... I would like to immerse my children in this environment as much as possible... Growing up in Kyiv, my children are unlikely to absorb it. I can only explain in words who the Crimean Tatars are and what Crimean Tatar sounds like. They hear it, but they don't understand it, as no one speaks it except for their parents. It feels like it's some sort of 'inactive' language... We try to pass on the Crimean Tatar mentality as much as possible, but most of the time they are in Ukrainian-speaking kindergartens, and 90% of the people around them are Ukrainians (man, 33, Kyiv).

It was interesting to note the reflections of some respondents who have rethought their behaviour and decisions regarding their departure from Crimea in 2014. According to them, if they had known they would have to be separated from Crimea for such a long time, they would likely have preferred to 'fade into the background,' becoming less publicly critical of the Russian authorities, in exchange for the possibility to live, work, or at least occasionally visit Crimea:

This is not regret, but if I had the choice in 2014 to not be active in journalism and instead engage in working on a cultural project, like what Karadeniz Production or Canli Radio is doing, I would prefer to live under conditions akin to imprisonment, where you know the boundaries of danger and are not involved in secret activities for Ukraine, and you do not work against Ukraine... but also do not provoke the new occupying authorities enough to threaten your own safety. Yes, you find a niche to realize your usefulness for your community and preserve yourself within that community (man, 47, Germany).

5. Homeland, de-occupation and return

Hammer (2005, p. 15) emphasizes that migration, particularly when involuntary, is often viewed as a temporary condition. Few migrants are willing or able to sever all connections with their homeland, as it represents family, culture, and the familiar. Forced migration, being neither planned nor desired, typically reinforces emotional ties to the homeland and fosters a longing to return someday. For most Crimean Tatars in post-1944 exile, Crimea was not a place they could physically 'return' to, as they had never lived there themselves. For them, the concept of return was symbolic, rooted in learned and transmitted memories and images

(Hammer, 2005, p. 5). In contrast, for Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014, the notion of 'return' carries a literal meaning, reflecting their desire to go back to the places where they once lived and where many still have their physical homes.

Our study revealed that Crimean Tatars' perceptions and plans for return vary. Most of the Crimean Tatars interviewed, whether in mainland Ukraine or abroad, envisioned their future connected to Crimea. Many are eagerly anticipating the day when Crimea will be de-occupied by Ukrainian military forces and look forward to returning to their homeland to contribute to its transformation and development. Some respondents confess that the mere thought of returning to Crimea serves as a source of hope and motivation for them. They frequently imagine their return and have clear ideas about what they plan to do once they are back:

This really drives me. It's not just that I will return; I have an entire program in mind of what I want to do there. And I think that's what's keeping me afloat... It's important to me that Crimea becomes – this might sound overly grand – a place where new meanings are born, not just for Ukraine but for the democratic world as a whole. I see enormous potential there in the realm of culture and creative industries. I realize that it would be incredibly interesting for me to explore how this works... The process of decolonizing Crimea is something I dream about – I can't wait to personally replace those signs (man, 35, Kyiv).

Some Crimean Tatars who have built successful careers on mainland Ukraine also intend to return to Crimea and contribute to its development. They are willing to leave behind their established lives to serve their homeland and their people. Often, they frame their decision to return within transgenerational narratives of past displacements, justifying it with a deep sense of responsibility toward the previous generations of Crimean Tatars who endured exile and struggled to return:

I very clearly feel myself as a Crimean. Here, I feel like a guest. I am comfortable and at ease, and I have great respect for Ukrainians, which is generally mutual. But I understand that the baton was passed to us by previous generations not so we could live a good and comfortable life somewhere else, but so we could do everything right for our people in Crimea. I would really like to do that. I believe I will find a role that I am capable of and where I can be useful. It doesn't necessarily have to be something political. It could involve education, outreach, or public life. I'm not sure where I will be or in what state at that stage, but I will try to contribute something useful to our people. This is very important to me (man, 38, Kyiv).

Studies (Aydin, 2024; Muratova et al., 2020) indicate that Crimean Tatars, who have dispersed across the globe over the past decade and now live in diverse cultural and political environments, often differ in their perceptions of events both within and outside Crimea. These differences sometimes manifest in off-site discussions and mutual accusations. For instance, social distancing has been observed in Turkey between migrants from Crimea who have endured Russia's oppressive policies and IDPs in mainland Ukraine, who were perceived as having chosen an easier path while still longing for their homeland (Aydin, 2024, pp. 13-14). This awareness of social distancing has led some IDPs and migrants to anticipate challenges, including the necessity for internal dialogue among Crimean Tatars following the de-occupation of Crimea. Despite these anticipated difficulties, most remain largely optimistic, believing that Crimea will undergo positive development following de-occupation, which will contribute to the unification of its people:

We will need to start talking to each other, understanding one another. Questions will arise about who among us was the greater patriot, who cooperated, and who spent ten years in exile. I am at least concerned about that. If we come from Ukraine, we will bring with us global projects – business, educational ones – that will be of interest to many. Everyone will get involved. I have high hopes for this. Everything we have gained today will be transferred to Crimea; we will attract international partners and guests. This will unite us all (woman, 37, United Kingdom).

While many Crimean Tatar displaced persons and migrants discussed returning to Crimea only after it is de-occupied by Ukraine, some respondents expressed a willingness to return earlier if there is a weakening of the repressive Russian regime and certain security guarantees are in place. Conversely, some respondents do not plan to return to Crimea in the near future, even after its de-occupation. Their main reasons include a desire for personal fulfilment, which they believe is limited in Crimea. Among those uncertain about returning are individuals who had planned to live and work outside the peninsula even before their departure in 2014, finding Crimea to be provincial, uncomfortable, and lacking in opportunities. Some respondents admitted that their thinking, self-perception, and views on their future have evolved during their years living outside Crimea. They are now less certain about returning. However, whether or not they have close relatives in Crimea may become a critical factor in their decision to go back:

Sometimes I ask myself this question, honestly. Suppose Crimea returns, and there is an opportunity to live there. Would I live in Crimea? If I honestly ask myself, my thinking has changed a bit, and my perspective has shifted. This is related to my position, career, and personal aspirations. So, it has become a question for me. Moreover, my parents are already living with me here. It happened that they got COVID-19 before all these events and barely survived. I brought them with me, so my close family, my brother, parents – everyone is here. Many things have changed slightly (man, 44, Kyiv).

Another group of respondents indicated that they do not plan to move to Crimea for permanent residence but would like to visit periodically and contribute positively to their community. For some, the idea of living in multiple countries while regularly visiting Crimea is particularly appealing:

I ideally want to live in several countries. I would like to have my own little nest in Berlin, in Portugal, and in Crimea. And to travel like that... I really enjoyed how I lived between Crimea and Kyiv, where I could travel back and forth easily. Even though I lived in Kyiv, I would go to Crimea every two or three months and stay connected. I would like to have a little nest in Crimea, where I could drop by, possibly even make it my main base, but still travel around. But to move and stay... I love big cities; I need activity. I always felt Crimea was too small for me. I like to fly away, pick up something, that kind of arrangement would suit me (woman, 34, Germany).

The change in Crimean Tatars' perceptions of Crimea as a 'promised land', where they believe they should exclusively reside, cannot be solely attributed to developments after 2014. In fact, scholars had observed signs of disillusionment with post-repatriation realities earlier, as their idealized visions of the peninsula clashed with the harsh conditions they encountered (Williams, 1997, p. 248; Uehling, 2004, p. 196). Uehling noted that while Crimean Tatars in the late 1990s would have preferred death to leaving the peninsula, by 2001, they were considering other options:

Faced with rampant corruption, unemployment, and a depressed economy in Ukraine, many Crimean Tatars were investigating the possibility of working for dollars or euros elsewhere. Parents were taking an increasingly dim view of their children's future, a future that once seemed bright in Crimea. While their love for their homeland was not diminished, they were becoming increasingly doubtful about their practical ability to withstand its hardships (Uehling, 2004, p. 196).

For some Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014, the displacement brought new opportunities they had been seeking before the annexation and provided a moral justification for being away from their homeland.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the discussion on displacement and belonging by offering a cross-temporal analysis of place attachment within a community that has been displaced twice from the same location, 70 years apart. Although different generations of the Crimean Tatars experienced displacements that varied in scope and nature, they share similar narratives of belonging and place attachment. At the same time, the study demonstrates that the temporal distance from the act of displacement matters: the narratives of the first generation of victims are more individualistic and rooted in personal experiences and memories of living in Crimea. While nearly all layers of homeland perception identified by researchers among exiled Crimean Tatars – such as a marker of identity, a mythologized destination, and a place where their people reside – remain evident in the narratives of those displaced after 2014, their emphasis and meaning have shifted. In the post-deportation era, two layers – homeland as an identity marker and a mythologized destination – were dominant for a long time. In contrast, for those displaced after 2014, Crimea is primarily seen as the place where their community lives and where most aspire to return. Autobiographical, cultural, and relational factors play a significant role in shaping the sense of place-belongingness among Crimean Tatars following their 2014 displacement from Crimea. Personal experiences, memories, and relationships, along with a longing for connections with friends and relatives and the familiar semiotic environment with its unique codes and signs, are crucial in this context.

People create the environment in which cultural identity can be maintained and passed down to future generations. For those displaced after 2014, their attachment to their homeland evokes a deep longing, making it difficult to feel fully content or whole while separated. However, this attachment alone cannot guarantee the preservation of cultural identity without an environment where the language thrives, communication occurs within shared cultural codes, and symbols of their native culture surround them. This contrasts with the experiences of Crimean Tatars during exile. Despite being unable to return to Crimea, they mostly lived in close-knit communities, where they collectively experienced their attachment to the homeland through strong familial and communal bonds. Collectivism and environment played key roles in successfully transmitting this attachment to future generations. In contrast, Crimean Tatars

displaced after 2014 lack this collective experience. They are dispersed across different regions and countries, with attachment to their homeland often confined to their small family units or infrequent contact with fellow Crimean Tatars. This fragmentation makes it challenging to pass on a deep attachment to Crimea to the next generation.

Another distinction between the two periods is that the perception of the homeland as ‘a rationally designed place in search of a better life’ is the least prominent in the discourse of Crimean Tatars displaced after 2014. Many Crimean Tatars, often for the first time, had the chance to live in major cities across Ukraine or abroad and, to their surprise, they recognized the provincial nature of Crimea and its limitations for personal growth, career advancement, and business opportunities. As a result, the desire to return to Crimea is less about the prospects it currently offers or may provide after de-occupation. Instead, it is driven by a patriotic commitment to serve their people and homeland, along with a deep sense of responsibility toward past generations of Crimean Tatars.

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