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How the Crimean Tatars Spoil Putin's Annexation Myth

Justyna Prus, Konrad Zasztowt

The annexation of Crimea has been a propaganda gain for the Kremlin, helping to augment support for the ruling elites. However, the protests of minorities opposing the annexation—Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians—has prompted Russians to begin harsh repressions. On May 18, the Crimean Tatars commemorate the anniversary of the Stalinist deportation of their nation in 1944, which led to mass deaths among the deported population. Although the Crimean Tatars are a relatively small minority at the peninsula, they are politically well organised and will not accept the Kremlin's praise of the Soviet (including Stalinist) era, or the current authoritarian system based on neo-imperial and neo-Soviet ideology.

“Krymnash,” or “Crimea Is Ours:”

How Annexation and Euphoria Helped Resurrect Vladimir Putin

The annexation of Crimea, accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign, helped Putin's regime overcome a serious legitimacy crisis that has been in progress since the mass protests of 2011–2012. According to the Levada Center's surveys just after the Crimea referendum in March 2014, and Putin's announcement of the annexation, the president's ratings went up from 69% to 80% in March 2014. Not only have they not fallen back since, but in the next months Putin's approval rate ranged between 83% (May 2014) and a record level of 88% in October 2014. Since then, the approval rate has been no lower than 85%. And it was not only Putin's rating that went up, but also that of the prime minister, the government, the Duma, and the governors of Russian regions.

The massive effect of the “Crimea euphoria” was possible due to multiple factors. Firstly, for the great majority of Russians, this was a “free” prize—they did not feel, at least at the beginning, the costs of the annexation. The negative influence connected with the sanctions was not immediate, and the propaganda campaign managed to transfer the responsibility to the West, allegedly trying to humiliate Russia and to take economic revenge on it for regaining power. Secondly, the annexation avoided bloodshed and was not connected to military losses, thus it was perceived as evidence of Putin's clever policy. Thirdly, gaining Crimea and the way it was interpreted as “rejoining the Motherland” and “historical justice” addressed popular emotions and Russians' sense of injustice.

Russian propaganda enhances the notion of Crimea being historically exclusively Russian, using arguments from a range of historical myths. One of the most politically important narratives, proving the “Russianness” of the peninsula, is the story of baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kyiv in 988, in the Greek colony of Khersones (now part of Sevastopol). Russian historical policy ignores the fact that Kyivan Rus is

also regarded by Ukraine as its predecessor, and that a pageant of civilisations existed on the peninsula, including several Turkic states, which not only predated Vladimir's visit to Kherones but also existed for centuries afterwards. In monopolising Crimea's history, Russia marginalises the role of the Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians inhabiting this territory,¹ and omits the fact that Russian rule over the region started only in 1783, when the Crimean Khanate was annexed by Catherine the Great.

The massive propaganda campaign (later enriched with the issue of the war in Donbas) became an important and effective instrument of shaping public opinion and deepening anti-Western and confrontational moods. In this sense, Crimea's annexation marked an important change both in Russian foreign and information policy. These became instruments of isolation, by deepening the division between Russia and its society and the Western world, as a means to maintain the regime's legitimacy.

Most Russians are not aware of the real situation in Crimea or the costs they need to bear because of the annexation. In Russian media the Crimea situation is presented as a triumph for the self-determination of the peninsula's Russian-speaking majority (with help from Russia), and a democratic process, which is not respected by the West because of double standards.

The Installation of Pro-Russian Authorities

On the level of social engineering, Russia used the imagined threat of NATO as justification for taking military control over Crimea. For years, Russian propaganda convinced the societies of Russia and Ukraine of NATO's aggressive plans. Since the 2004 Orange Revolution, the imaginary "American" or "Western" enemy was said to be planning an overthrow of the legal government using proxies—fake rebels paid by the CIA or other Western secret agencies. When the Euromaidan events started, and former president Victor Yanukovich (fearing responsibility for the bloodshed in Kyiv) escaped the country, the prophecies of Russian propagandists seemed for many Russians to have been fulfilled. The Crimean population started to believe the propaganda about the threat from the Ukrainian "fascist Banderites" or "Nazis" from Pravyi Sektor. According to the Russian media narrative, the right wing protesters and rebels from Kyivan Maidan were planning to go to Crimea to take power, and forcefully Ukrainise the population (in the least dramatic scenario) or to commit genocide against Russian speaking inhabitants of the peninsula (in the worst case scenario). Even taking into account that the majority of Crimean inhabitants really believed in that threat, and many of them shared a Russian nationalist outlook, they were not able to organise themselves, and were not determined to start separatist activities. However, the Yanukovich escape and the pro-European revolution were used as a pretext by Russia to "give power to the people," in order to let them "self-determine" by means of a referendum. In fact, both the referendum and the installation of pro-Russian authorities were organised totally under Russian control and in the presence of Russian military forces, which was acknowledged recently by Putin himself in the documentary "Crimea: The Road to Motherland."² The building of the Supreme Council of Crimea was captured at night by Russian troops (night of 26–27 February). The deputies voted, in the presence of the soldiers, to conduct the referendum, which was held on 16 March, again with the "assistance" of Russian military units. Two days later the treaty on the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation was signed in Moscow.

¹ The Crimean Tatars are descendants of many Turkic and non-Turkic nations living in Crimea, not only of the Tatar troops, who came to area with the Batu-khan conquest of Eastern Europe in the first decades of the 13th century, but first of all of the Turkic Kipchak tribes, who settled in the region in the 11th century. The Ukrainians had long history of interactions with the Crimean Tatars, which included bloody conflicts, but also periods of political cooperation against the Polish–Lithuanian commonwealth and Moscow, and flourishing trade relations. In the 17th and 18th centuries, many Ukrainians moved to the lands of the Crimean Tatar Khan, escaping from Russian territorial expansion and repressions of free Kozak communities.

² "Krym. Put na rodinu. Dokumentalnyy film Andrey Konrashova," www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42-71RpRgl, accessed 15 May 2015.

Crackdown on Opponents

Since the lightning installation of the occupying government led by Sergei Aksyonov (formerly a marginal politician, and in the 1990s a member of an organised crime group), Russia has been consistently conducting a policy of “erasing” Ukraine from the peninsula. That concerns closing schools and classes with Ukrainian as the language of instruction, the arrests of Ukrainian activists (among others, Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov), or preventing gatherings to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko. To cut links with Ukraine, authorities blocked Ukrainian TV channels, which are not available even through the internet. Crimea’s inhabitants cannot use Ukrainian mobile phone services, which are banned on the territory of the peninsula.

Although the Russian majority of the peninsula’s population still supports Russia’s annexation of Crimea despite economic problems, the Crimean Tatar minority remains in opposition to the Russian installed authorities. The Crimean Tatars constitute only about 15% of the peninsula’s population, having a bigger share (up to 29%) in several rural regions.³ However, the political “weight” of this population is much bigger. Muslim Crimean Tatars, together with small groups of Karaims and Krymchaks (both sects within Judaism), are three autochthonous nations of the peninsula. Moreover, the Crimean Tatars are the only significant part of the population that does not subscribe to pro-Soviet nostalgia.

That is understandable, as their grandparents had been subjected to genocidal deportation on 18 of May 1944, which was explained by Soviet propaganda as collective punishment for alleged massive collaboration with German authorities during the Nazi occupation of Crimea (1941–1944). Between 20% (according to Soviet NKVD sources) and up to 46% (according to Tatar organisations) of the Crimean Tatar population died on their way to Central Asia, or in the first year in exile, while living in subhuman conditions in the labour camps. However, it was not only this tragedy, but the Tatar elite’s political drive after the war that shaped their strong collective political identity, based on opposition to the Soviet regime. The Crimean Tatar dissidents striving for “rehabilitation” (annulment of deportation decrees) and the right to return to Crimea became one of the most daring opponents of the system. Although the Soviet authorities never allowed them to return to the peninsula, the majority of Crimean Tatars nevertheless did so in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Since their return, Mejlis, the political body representing the Crimean Tatars, has been in alliance with Ukrainian patriotic and anti-Soviet political forces such as Rukh. Later, the Crimean Tatar Mejlis supported Orange Revolution, and Yulia Tymoshenko in the 2010 presidential election. That also resulted in worsening the situation of the Crimean Tatar minority during the Yanukovich presidency. During the Euromaidan and Russian military intervention, the Crimean Tatars were the most vocal group protesting against Yanukovich, and subsequently Russia’s annexation of the peninsula.

From the time of annexation, the Kremlin tried to address the Crimean Tatar issue. Failing to gain their leaders’ political support, Moscow decided to start repressions against them. In the beginning of March 2014, Crimean Tatar activist Reshat Ametov, who peacefully protested against the annexation, was kidnapped and killed by the Russian militia Samooborona. Since then, several other activists have been kidnapped or disappeared. The main targets of the repression are Mejlis and its leaders. In May 2014, Mustafa Jemilev, Crimean Tatar leader and well-known Soviet dissident, was not allowed to enter Crimea, and soon after the same ban was imposed on Refat Chubarov, head of Mejlis. Ahtem Chiygoz, his deputy, was arrested in January 2015, and accused of having played a role in the clashes that took place between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian demonstrators in February 2014, a month before the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia. His pretrial detention was recently extended until July. The true goal is probably not to allow him to participate in the commemoration of the anniversary of deportation. On 6 May Chiygoz started hunger strike in prison.

³ There is no up to date information on the number of Crimean Tatars living in Crimea, as the last Ukrainian census was held in 2001.

Attempts to Create Pseudo Crimean Tatar Institutions

Historical legacy has been and will continue to be the most serious problem in relations between Crimean Tatars and Russia. Putin addressed the problem of rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar nation in his annexation speech on 18 March 2014. The Russian president acknowledged that they had been treated “unfairly” as had a number of other peoples of the USSR, but that Russians were the biggest group that suffered during repressions. He said the process of rehabilitation had to be “finalised.” On 14 November 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a statement “On Recognising the Illegal and Criminal Repressive Acts against Peoples Subjected to Forcible Resettlement and Ensuring Their Rights.” It officially recognised 11 “Repressed Peoples,” including the Crimean Tatars.⁴

On 21 April 2014, Putin signed a decree on “measures to rehabilitate Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Crimean Tatar and German nations and State support for their revival and development.”⁵ It envisaged actions concerning reinstating historical justice, defending rights and interests, enabling social and spiritual revival, regulating rights to real property, and more.

The Crimean Tatar community, however, did not perceive this document as anything more than just a bureaucratic act. According to Mustafa Jemilev, “this is just a piece of paper that does not influence reality.”⁶

It does not seem that Russia would be eager to address Stalin’s mass deportation of Crimean Tatars seriously, especially as historical policy in Russia now tends to justify all the crimes of the Stalinist period as necessary actions in order to conduct modernisation of the state, which then made it possible to win the war with Nazi Germany. As Stalin is being rehabilitated, the question of condemning his actions, especially those undertaken during the Second World War (also strongly mythologised) seems impossible. Even before the annexation, Russia proved it was not willing to discuss the subject of the tragedy of the Crimean Tatars tragedy, and in 2013, the film “Khaytarma,” telling the story of the 1944 deportation, was banned from cinemas in Russia and broadly criticised.

Last year, before the 70th anniversary of the deportation, the *de facto* authorities in Crimea banned all mass gatherings, including those commemorating the victims. The Mejlis members’ houses were searched, about 150 activists were interrogated, and additional special police (OMON) forces were sent to Crimea from other parts of Russia. Eventually, the Tatar community was allowed to conduct a modest meeting in the suburbs of Simferopol. Ahead of the 71th anniversary the *de facto* authorities have again banned the Mejlis commemoration under the pretext that Crimean Tatars, together with “Ukrainian nationalists,” were planning to conduct “provocations” and “terrorist attacks.” Mustafa Jemilev said the authorities were trying to intimidate Crimean Tatars into not undertaking any public actions.⁷

On 5 February 2015, the occupation authorities erected a monument of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt in Yalta, to commemorate the conference held there in 1945. The monument, named the Big Three, was unveiled in the presence of Sergey Naryshkin, speaker of the Russian Duma. As part of the preparations for the anniversary of the 9 May victory over Nazi Germany, local communists also unveiled a memorial plaque of Stalin in front of the Communist Party office in Simferopol. Both actions were strongly opposed and criticised by Crimean Tatars as glorifying the Soviet tyrant responsible for mass repressions. On the side of the Crimean Tatars, any compromise on the subject of repressions—the central point of their identity and history—is out of the question. Thus it can be expected that this will continue to be the core problem in relations with Russia.

⁴ J. Otto Pohl, “The Deportation and Fate of the Crimean Tatars,” 5th Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities; *Identity and the State: Nationalism and Sovereignty in a Changing World*, 13–15 April 2000, Columbia University, New York, www.iccrimea.org/scholarly/jopohl.html.

⁵ “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 21 aprila 2014 g., Nr 268,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 23 April 2014, www.rg.ru/2014/04/21/reabilitaciya-site-dok.html.

⁶ Interview with Mustafa Jemilev, 12 May 2015.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Russian propaganda does not address this very problem, and, since the moment of the referendum, has been presenting false information to its citizens. Those Crimean Tatars who are against the annexation are presented as simply pro-Ukrainian, without further explanation of what stands behind these attitudes. For Crimean Tatars, the time of Kyivan authority over Crimea, although not ideal, was better and safer than, historically, any period under Russian or Soviet authority. Coverage in the Russian media does not inform about the mass boycott of the referendum, instead suggesting that many Crimean Tatars were voting for “Russian stability.” The media have presented “touching” stories about Russian–Tatar families in Crimea, to prove that most Crimean Tatars support the referendum and annexation, and that the only reason for criticism of Russian policy is supporting the “oppressive” Kyivan authorities.

At the same time, the occupying authorities try to divide and rule, and create parallel structures representing Crimean Tatars in order to marginalise Mejlis. The authorities co-opt some Crimean Tatar politicians in attempts to take control of the Crimean Tatar minority and replace with the repressed Mejlis leadership. Since last year, one of the most pro-Russian politicians has been is Remzi Ilyasov, vice-speaker of the local parliament and founder of the pro-regime Tatar movement “Crimea.” His decision to legitimise Russian-imposed power structures was criticised by Mejlis, and he was stripped of his membership of it. However, it seems that he is seen by Moscow as a possible candidate to take over the leadership among the Crimean Tatars, with the help of administrative resources. Ruslan Balbek, Crimean Tatar vice prime minister of the *de facto* government, has been a strong supporter of the annexation and participated in creating the occupying authorities. In April, during an unofficial Turkish delegation visit to observe the situation of the Crimean Tatars in occupied Crimea, Balbek did everything he could to convince the Turks that minority rights had not been violated. He said that Crimean Tatars “only profited”⁸ from the annexation. The Turkish officials also met with representatives of Ilyasov’s pro-Russian movement.

Lenur Islamov, a Crimean Tatar from Moscow and owner of many businesses in Russia, became another important Crimean Tatar political figure. Islamov, claiming that contrary to other Crimean Tatars he already had Russian citizenship, and thus was not betraying his state by collaboration with the authorities, agreed to become deputy prime minister in the *de facto* government. However, he later resigned from this position and focused on his media business, including Crimean TV station ATR⁹, which had played a very important role in the renaissance of the Crimean Tatar language and culture. Despite Islamov’s moderate stance towards Russian occupation, ATR was not re-registered on the peninsula and ceased broadcasting at the beginning of April. The reason given by the *de facto* prime minister Aksyonov, in conversation with Islamov, was that ATR was “controlled by the U.S.” and disseminated anti-government propaganda, offering hope that Crimea may some day be returned to Ukraine. In fact, the channel was moderate in its critical comments towards the *de facto* government, and Islamov was even ready to confine its coverage to strictly non-political issues. Contrary to Ilyasov, it seems that Islamov, trying to use his Russian ties to defend the Crimean Tatars’ minority rights, and was not perceived by Moscow as easily controllable.

Even taking into account that some pro-Russian groupings among Crimean Tatars were active before annexation (for example, the National Party, *Milli Firka*), the Aksyonov regime’s current political line continues to be repressive towards this minority. Arrests of activists, searches of Tatar houses and mosques under the pretext of looking for “extremist” literature became everyday occurrences. Therefore, any significant Tatar support for the current authorities is highly unlikely.

Risks for the Future and Challenges for the West

The annexation of Crimea plays a central role of the new Russian political order and is perceived as the foundation of the regime’s legitimacy. Thus Moscow will be eager to strengthen the myth of “Russian Crimea” by fiery defence of the annexation on the international arena and cultivating propaganda myths inside the country. Any change of stance on Crimea would be perceived by Moscow as a political defeat.

⁸ “Balbek nameknul turetskoy delegatsii, chto krymskiye tatory ‘tolko vyigrali’ ot anneksii,” 28 April 2015, <http://ru.krymr.com/content/news/26983383.html>, accessed 15 May 2015.

⁹ Also other Crimean Tatar media, including a radio station and children’s television channel.

For the same reason, the elites will do anything to conceal the political and economic costs of annexing Crimea, so that it does not influence Russian society's attitude. First of all, society will not be informed about it reliably (or at all) because the state controls the media. The authorities and the media will continue to blame the external factors for sanctions, and for the worsening economic situation, and will increasingly use this to channel the growing disappointment if the economic situation continues to worsen.

The promises concerning the economic development of Crimea will not, in all likelihood, be fulfilled in the forthcoming years. It cannot be excluded that Moscow is not even interested in realising the economic "Crimean heaven" project, but instead views the peninsula's military role as the priority. Thus it will increasingly use propaganda to hide the failure to make Crimea a prosperous region, and concentrate on expanding military capacity, which could also be an impulse for economic development.

Russia used an imagined threat to Russian speaking citizens in Crimea to annex and occupy the peninsula, but the first thing it did was to install authorities subordinate to Moscow and repress the non-Russian minorities. In other words, the pretext of protecting the rights of one ethnic group was used as an excuse to brutally violate the rights of others. As Moscow's goal is to continue with its russification policy in order to comply with the myth of the "Russian Crimea," the rights of Crimean Tatars will continue to be seriously violated.

It seems that Russian idea is to try to gain the support of the Tatar community by taking control over their leadership. This would enable Moscow to present its policy as a successful model of cohabitation. Actions undertaken by the Russian authorities in Crimea, such as the repression of Tatar political leaders and activists, as well as closure of their media, prove that Moscow is not ready to let Crimean Tatars cultivate their legacy and traditions freely. It seems highly unlikely that Crimean Tatars, a minority with ages-long experience of resisting both Russia and the USSR, will accept the role of an apolitical ethnographic group, in which their traditions are used only decoratively, copying the Soviet treatment of ethnic minorities. Some can decide to emigrate, and in 2014 10,000 Crimean Tatars left the peninsula.

History will be the main problem in mutual relations, and Crimean Tatars will not be willing to relinquish their historical memory, which is a crucial element of their identity. Thus it seems like two models of co-existence are possible, both negative. One pushes the minority underground, and the other is characterised by open repressions of Crimean Tatars by using accusations of being pro-Ukrainian, anti-Russian, "fifth column," and so on. With its neo-Soviet ideology and increasing glorification of Stalin's policy, it does not seem as if Moscow is willing to even try to offer any model of cohabitation that would be acceptable for the Crimean Tatars.

The EU and the West should not accept the Russian notion of a return to "business as usual" by *de facto* accepting the Crimea annexation. The sanctions should remain in force as long as the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory continues. The sanctions list of members of the occupying government responsible for the abuses of power and repressions of civil society should be updated.

Passing over the Crimea problem when speaking of Ukrainian territorial integrity, which was the case during the Minsk II negotiations in February 2015, sets a dangerous precedent. Such conduct only reassures Russia that there is no political will in the West to defend Ukrainian territorial integrity, and serves as indirect legitimisation of Russia's actions in the eyes of Russians and the international community.

The EU and the Euro-Atlantic community, including Turkey, should not accept the annexation of Crimea silently, but should speak up for the repressed minorities in Russian occupied Crimea, as well as act against political and physical repressions. It is especially important to harmonise the activities of Brussels and Ankara regarding the Crimean issue. Turkey is only cautiously critical of Russian policies towards Ukraine, due to strong economic ties between Ankara and Moscow, although it is worried about the fate of the Crimean Tatars, who are ethnically, religiously and culturally closely affiliated to the Turks. Russia should be reminded by the international community of its obligations, arising from membership of the Council of Europe, to grant rights for ethnic minorities.

Even if the Crimea problem cannot be solved in a diplomatic way in the foreseeable future, more soft power should be engaged in order to support civil society, not only Crimean Tatar organisations but also others involved in defending human rights and civil liberties.

The media blockade of Crimea is another serious challenge, which should be addressed by the European community including the EU, and Ukrainian government. Despite the Russian authorities' ability to block and close independent websites, the EU should use its financial instruments (EDIHR, and the Civil Society Facility) to support journalists and media activities in Crimea.

Active members of civil society, such as journalists, NGO members, and students, should be offered the possibility to travel and study in the EU Member States. These groups should be identified and granted access to special mechanisms that would simplify visa procedures.