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Background Paper

Historical background

EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT UNTIL 1900

The current situation in the Crimean Peninsula, with its geopolitical and ethnic implications, can be explained by its complex historical background. Long before the peninsula was conquered by the Russian Empire under the Empress Catherine II in 1783, various civilizations and cultures intersected and intertwined in Crimea. The peninsula was inhabited in the early times as a crossroad of cultures, peoples and trade. In the 15th century, the Crimean Khanate emerged and shortly after its formation fell under the authority of the Ottoman Empire. During the times of Khanate, a pre-modern nation of Crimean Tatars was forged. After the Khanate had been conquered and annexed by the Russian Empire, a large influx of settlers from the Russian Empire, particularly from the mainland Ukraine, and the following waves of semi-forced displacement, massive political and religious persecutions of Crimean Tatars changed the ethnic composition of the peninsula. After the annexation of Crimea, the share of Crimean Tatars living in the peninsula was steadily decreasing to only 25 percent in 1900. At the same time, part of existing Crimean Tatar settlements were given new names and new towns were founded to be used as fortresses against the armies of Russia's adversaries in the Black Sea region. The cultures of indigenous peoples of the peninsula were marginalized by the Russian Empire and Crimean Tatar history of the peninsula was being erased.

Moreover, the geopolitical importance was also stressed during the second half of the 19th century when the Crimean War broke out as a consequence of struggle of world powers over the entire area of the Black Sea and East European region.

Further, the current East European nations understand Crimea as a cradle of their religious tradition. This symbolic value is firmly anchored in both Ukrainian and Russian perceptions about Crimea and penetrates into discussions about its geopolitical position.

20TH CENTURY EVENTS

During the fall of empires amid World War I, nations in Europe began the struggle for their national states. In 1918 after the short-lived People's Republic of Crimea, a first democratic Muslim republic formed by a Crimean Tatar national movement was demolished by Bolsheviks who won over other forces fighting in Crimea.

As the Red Army prevailed, Crimea became an autonomous administrative unit within Soviet Russia in 1921. In two decades between world wars, a population of the peninsula suffered from hunger, forced collectivisation and mass political repressions. Shortly after the withdrawal of the Nazis from Crimea in 1944, Stalin's regime committed a massive and unprecedented deportation of Crimean Tatars. Alleged collaboration with the Nazis was used as a pretext for final ethnic purge of indigenous peoples from Crimea; more than 200,000 Crimean Tatars were expelled from their homes. Members of other ethnic minorities living in Crimea (Germans, Italians, Bulgarians, Armenians, Greeks, and others) were deported, too. Crimea lost its status of an autonomous republic and was converted into the *Crimean Oblast* of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

In 1954, the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet approved the decision to transfer Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR). Officially, the move was "a noble act on the part of the Russian people" to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav of 1654, based on the "territorial proximity of Crimea to Ukraine, the commonalities of their economies, and the close agricultural and cultural ties between

the Crimean Oblast and the UkrSSR".[1] But there were rational reasons for this. As of 1954, Crimea was a depopulated (after mass deportations) territory with war-torn infrastructure and threats related to the problem of fresh water supply to the peninsula. In addition, despite the previous ten-year official affiliation of the Crimea with Soviet Russia, the region remained closely connected to the North Black Sea region economically, socially, and culturally, like it had been for thousands of years. Thus, it was geography and logistics, as well as Soviet Russia's unwillingness to take on the burden of rebuilding the peninsula, including the construction of the North Crimean Canal, that led to the transfer of Crimea to Soviet Ukraine in 1954.

INDEPENDENCE OF UKRAINE

On 24th August 1991, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine that was supported by [90.3 percent](#) voters in a referendum on 1st December. In Crimea itself, [54 percent](#) voters supported Ukrainian independence. International recognition of independent Ukraine soon followed, including from Russian SFSR, which only accelerated the dissolution of the USSR. Crimea was granted an upgraded status of an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian state. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars received an opportunity to legally return to their homeland. During the 1990s, they were returning to the peninsula en masse. Their historic experience had laid base for largely anti-Russian sentiments, opposite to those held by the Russian-speaking population living in Crimea.

In 1994, territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea, was approved by Russia, in the Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (the so-called [Budapest memorandum](#)), among many other documents and treaties. Other important bilateral documents are as follows: Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian state border (2003) and Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Ukraine on cooperation in the use of the sea of Azov and the strait of Kerch (2003-2004).

2014 POST-MAIDAN RUSSIAN ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

As the Ukrainian civil society and voters steadily sought aspirations towards the West, the changed political landscape resulted in the Revolution of Dignity and the fall of the then pro-Russian political representation in February 2014. Russia, following its internal interests, reacted harshly, illegally, and aggressively – because of its symbolic value for the Russian neo-imperial aspirations, the Crimean Peninsula was occupied and given the status of a republic within the Russian Federation. As a consequence, Crimea was once again a witness to an exodus of 140,000 Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians, while according to various estimations half million to 800,000 Russian citizens illegally settled newly on the peninsula. Although the EU and other Western countries raised objections against this move and did not recognize the legitimacy of the so-called referendums that reportedly supported the secession of Crimea to Russia, their attention moved soon to the east of Ukraine where another stage of Russian invasion had erupted.[2]

Geopolitical and geostrategic implications of the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and the consequent war against Ukraine

INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 followed by Russia's unprovoked open military aggression against Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state in February 2022 sent shockwaves through the global political scene and challenged the principles of rules-based international order that emerged after the end of the Cold War. Russia's aggression against Ukraine reintroduced the perspective of national interests and the rhetoric of spheres of influence into international relations, and questioned principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the sanctity of international law. Together with far-reaching global socio-economic consequences, the war in Ukraine will for sure have profound influence on relations on the global political scene in the coming years and can be one of the decisive factors that will shape the future form of the international order.

In March 2023, a year after the Russian full-scale, unprovoked, and aggressive invasion in Ukraine started, a revised version of the [Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation](#) was approved by a presidential decree and published. The Concept tremendously diverged from its previous versions in many ways.¹[3] As an example, "good neighbourly [sic] relations with adjoining states and [helping] to overcome existing and prevent potential tensions and conflicts in regions adjacent to the Russian Federation" transformed in an overtly assertive, influence- and power-driven Russian stance in which the Russian Federation "seeks to prevent armed conflicts, improve inter-state relations, and ensure stability in the near abroad, including preventing the instigation of 'colour revolutions' and other attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Russia's allies and partners" (Concept, 49. 1). Paradoxically, the Russian Federation sticks to the rule of law in international order and principles of international humanitarian law. Yet, the Russian practical steps to pursue its goals in the foreign domain - the expansive and brutal interventions abroad - are outrageously contradictory to these formal provisions.

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS – CRIMEA 2014, UKRAINE 2022

The temporary occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 challenged the post-Cold War European order that emphasized the inviolability of national borders. By violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, Russia sets a dangerous precedent that undermines the stability of the region. This act of aggression has raised concerns among neighbouring states, particularly in Eastern Europe the Caucasus Region, Central Asia, as it has heightened fears of potential future Russian encroachment on their territories. Moreover, the attempted annexation of Crimea has rekindled tensions between Russia and NATO, leading to a deterioration of relations. Several remarks regarding the geopolitical implications are worth mentioning.

Russian interference in Ukrainian politics in 2013 and 2014 was a logical consequence of Putin's aggressive policy of 'counter-revolutions' aiming to prevent liberalisation of political development in Russia's close allied and neighbouring countries. The Rose Revolution (Georgia, 2003), the Orange Revolution (Ukraine, 2004), and the Tulip Revolution (Kyrgyzstan, 2005) were perceived by Russian authority as significant threats

¹ Nigel Gould-Davis describes the sixth version of the Concept as the darkest one and schizophrenic.

to Russian policy in post-Soviet countries. Russia has since intentionally pursued its interest in an informal, covert, deceitful way in other countries that it considers as its sphere of influence in order to suppress any hints of civil society upheaval and liberalization of regimes.[4] The Revolution of Dignity proved that Russia will use this strategy of interference in internal politics of close allies and partners as a standard tool of its foreign policy in the future.

Further, the annexation of Crimea proved that Russia is a power state for which its diaspora is a pretext for encroachment in neighbouring countries. As a result of the Soviet ethnic policy, Russian minority was spread in member countries across the USSR. After the demise of the USSR, representatives of Russian minorities in the succeeding countries often times become the pivotal driver of Russian foreign policy in near abroad. This aspect may still have severe consequences in the entire area of post-Soviet countries in which the Russian minority card can be played similarly.

The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, released in March 2023, states a more pro-active and assertive Russian policy in near abroad, as already discussed. This doctrine shows a clear pattern of the Russian foreign policy in which geopolitical interests justify the use of power in the name of alleged jeopardy.²[5] The recent development proved right that Russia seeks to intervene actively, assertively and harshly in the case of aggressive interventions abroad where there is a risk of political instability (Kazakh Unrest, 2022)[6] and of alleged jeopardy of Russian security (Ukraine, 2022).

Due to the joint reaction of the Western world on the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022, there is definitely a shift in geopolitics. Russia will seek to foster new relations with the Global South.[7] The West shall react accordingly.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The importance of Crimea for the Russian foreign and military strategy is twofold. Firstly, there is symbolism in establishing the Russian control of Crimea as a first significant step of Russian aspiration as a regional hegemon and restoring its influence within the limits of the then Russian Empire. Secondly, the city of Sevastopol is homeport for Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea has also had significant strategic implications. By gaining control over Crimea, Russia has secured access to the strategic Black Sea region, enabling it to project power beyond its borders and expand its influence in the region and beyond (such as the Middle East). The control established over the peninsula has also provided Russia with significant military advantage, as it has gained a naval base in Sevastopol and control over vital infrastructure, including gas pipelines.

The geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region dates back to the 18th century. Thanks to international agreements that evolved during the 20th century (the Montreux Convention of 1936, renegotiated after World War II), the Black Sea region became a point of contact between Türkiye and NATO on one side, and the Soviet Union on the other side. At one point, the Convention allowed unlimited passage through the Turkish Straits for war ships of the Black Sea countries that were not at war with Türkiye. It implied that the Soviet war ships were granted free passage; Türkiye granted that the Black Sea was a natural pool for the Black Sea countries' military navies. On the contrary, non-regional countries were not allowed free navigation in the Black Sea. After the Cold War, the region lost its importance from the Western perspective. Still, Russia understood the region as

² *The Russian-NATO dispute on not expanding eastwards is an example of alleged jeopardy.*

its natural sphere of influence. Further, the Black Sea has allowed for a rather broader shaping of the concept of 'near abroad'.^[8]

Military conflicts (Georgia in 2008, occupation of Crimea in 2014) brought tensions between NATO and Russia in the region. The civil war in Syria, starting in 2011, and the Russian engagement since 2015 proved the importance of a direct access to Crimea (and the Black Sea, respectively) for Russian military strategies in 'near abroad' as a 'power projection platform'.^[9]

The attempted annexation of Crimea has also raised concerns about the potential for similar actions by other states. It has highlighted the vulnerability of post-Soviet countries and reinforced the need for a collective response to such aggression. The incident has also reinforced the importance of upholding international law and the norms of governing state behaviour.

After the outbreak of a full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Russia also dragged the temporarily occupied Crimea into the war by deploying even more troops there and actively using Crimea for military logistics, turning many locations into a military target. Thus, not only they destabilize the region, but also put the population remaining in the occupied territory as well as the environment and the cultural heritage of Crimea enlisted by UNESCO at risk of destruction in the midst of an all-out war.

Socioeconomic consequences and human rights concerns in Crimea and other Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

In the recent history of post-Soviet countries and the development of their mutual (no matter how complicated) relations, the case of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the open aggression in 2014 differ to a certain degree. In comparison to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war 2008, "the Europe's first twenty-first century war",^[10] the occupation of Crimea in 2014 was accompanied with overt human rights violations targeted against a specified group of citizens – Crimean Tatars as well as Ukrainians openly supporting territorial integrity of Ukraine, in particular, Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

As for the oppression of Crimean Tatars it dates back to 1783 when Russia annexed Crimea for the first time. The annexation symbolised a defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the north of the Black Sea region.^[11] The goal of the regime representatives was to expel the Crimean Tatar population from the area. The Soviet representatives went on in these attempts and finished the whole process in 1944 when, due to Stalin's decision, the Crimean Tatars were deported to Central Asia,^[12] which in turn dramatically changed the proportion of nationalities in peninsula. Crimean Tatars, coming back to their indigenous home in 1980s and 1990s, faced a relentless opposition from (mainly) Russians and post-communist local elites who, in addition, had taken their properties. A formerly nationalistic/religious issue soon became an economic issue, too.^[13]

Soon after the illegal occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, Crimean Tatars became a vocal opposition to Russia's aggressive policy. A new round of political persecution with violent oppression started. At that time, Russian authorities and their proxies subjected members of the Crimean Tatar community – vocal political leaders, supporters, journalists, bloggers, and activists – to harassment, intimidation, threats, intrusive and unlawful searches of their homes, psychical attacks, and enforced disappearances, political persecutions.^[14] The Crimean Tatars' social and political leaders

were targeted by Russian brutal policy – they were either forced to flee the peninsula or were arrested and convicted.[15] Currently, majority of political prisoners are Crimean Tatars.

Soon after the turbulent events in Crimea in 2014, international organizations that focus on human rights observation (UN, CoE, OSCE) started to deploy missions on monitoring the situation. However, throughout almost 10 years of the occupation there was only one international field mission held in the occupied Crimea. It was held by at that time Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (at that time – Nils Muižnieks) and resulted in the report critical towards the occupying administrations, which in fact made further missions impossible.

When it comes to the international reaction towards the human rights violations in the occupied Crimea, multiple reports and resolutions might be mentioned. The most significant of them are the UNGA resolutions on Situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine. These resolutions have been adopted by the General Assembly annually since 2016 and point to numerous human rights violations taking place in Crimea and resulting from the temporary occupation of the peninsula and supported by the majority of the UN Member States.

International courts are also worth mentioning. First of all, the admissibility decision of the European Court for Human Rights in the interstate case *Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)* of January 2021 that de facto recognized the fact of the military occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation since end-February 2014. The admissibility specified also some systematic human rights violations committed by the Russian Federation in Crimea: enforced disappearances and killings of the abducted persons; ill-treatment; unlawful detention; extending the Russian Federation's laws to Crimea; imposing Russian nationality in Crimea; harassment and intimidation of the religious leaders that do not conform to the Russian Orthodox Church, arbitrary raids of places of worship and confiscation of religious property; prohibiting public gatherings and manifestations of support; expropriation of property from civilians and private enterprises; suppressing the Ukrainian language in schools and harassing Ukrainian-speaking pupils; restricting the freedom of movement between Crimea and mainland Ukraine; harassment of Crimean Tatars on grounds of religious belief and in violation of their right to private life, restricting of their freedom; arbitrary raids of private dwellings; suppression of non-Russian media.

One of the recently established monitoring mechanisms was established in 2021, the Ministries' Deputies of the Council of Europe (CoE) decided to assess regularly the human rights situation in Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. The [first situational report](#) was published in May 2022, three months after the launch of the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine, and eight years after the occupation of Crimea. Due to security issues, much of field research did not take place. Yet, the report summarizes recent trends and developments based on desk study. The main message of the report is pessimistic. Human rights issues in Crimea have not improved and many of them persisted in an unsatisfactory way.

Despite the occupation in Crimea and other territories, human abuses are high on the agenda of Ukrainian authorities (official investigation and monitoring), as the CoE report of 2021 confirms. In this regard, more assistance from international community, including partner parliaments, could be useful.

Further, there have been several bottom-up initiatives (such as Crimea Solidarity group) as well as human rights organizations [Crimean Tatar Resource Centre](#) and [Crimean Human Rights Group](#) to monitor and observe human rights situation and inform on violations on the spot. These initiatives deserve more publicity and support for their activities. Thanks to them, the international community knows better the names of victims of Russian atrocities in Crimea and other occupied territories. The least the international community can do is to pay tribute to their achievements.

With each passing week, especially after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia against Ukraine, the number of political prisoners in Crimea is increasing. Currently, the occupying regime illegally holds at least 186 people. Among the political prisoners, 123 are Crimean Tatars. Journalists, civic activists, artists, and female political prisoners are among them.

After the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, occupied Crimea has become the place for the illegal detention of hostages from mainland Ukraine. Occupying administrations build new detention centres to feat new detainees. Some of them do not survive in captivity and brutal tortures.

In the meantime, and despite all the repression and persecution, Crimea resists. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, underground movements such as Yellow Ribbon, Atesh, Angry Mavka, and Crimean combat seagulls have been established. As of now, more than 500 people in Crimea have been prosecuted for so-called "discreditation of the russian army" but in fact for blue and yellow flags, vyshyvankas (Ukrainian traditional embroidered shirts), yellow ribbons, publicly singing "Chervona Kalyna" and even for "liking" posts in social media in support of Ukraine.

Restrictive measures and international reaction

The attempted annexation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol by Russia has led the EU to launch a series of restrictive measures towards Russia. The first measures were introduced in 2014 in reaction to the occupation of Crimea and included individual and economic sanctions as well as diplomatic measures. Gradually, as the situation in eastern Ukraine deteriorated, and as Russia started its aggressive war against Ukraine later on, the EU has introduced eleven successive packages of sanctions against Russia, and restrictive measures against Belarus and Iran. Also, economic relations with regions occupied by Russia have been stalled. Currently, there are five frameworks of EU restrictive measures related to the situation in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, or Ukraine as a whole, and one framework of EU sanctions against Belarus. Apart from EU sanctions, Russia has also faced a number of condemning resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly as well as series of restrictive measures from Western countries, such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America. With the aim to coordinate international action, the Crimea Platform was established in 2021.

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