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The Possible Effects of the Russian-Georgian Conflict for the Situation in Crimea

Author: Natalya Shapovalova

Key Points:

- Crimea is the only Ukrainian region where, due to historical reasons, Russians are the major ethnic group;
- Russia's influence over the region is very high due to presence of the Black Sea Fleet, the dominance of Russian media, and the power of pro-Russian political parties;
- The government in Kyiv cannot manage to integrate Crimea in Ukraine's political and social context nor can it resist growing influence from Russia;
- The potential for ethnic conflict is high and could be sparked either by an attempt on the part of the Ukrainian government to change any part of the status quo, or by the resistance of the Ukrainian government of demands for even greater local autonomy, the use of Russian as a second official language, or further moves on the part of Ukraine towards NATO;
- Russian military intervention in the case of ethnic conflict in Crimea, no matter how this may arise, cannot be ruled out.

I. Crimea as a Distinct Region of Ukraine

Crimea is a distinct region in Ukraine in terms of its ethnic and language composition, its constitutional status and its historical background.

First, it is the only Ukrainian region where, due to historical reasons, Russians are a major ethnic group. According to the 2001 all-Ukraine census, they are 58.5% of the population of Crimea, while ethnic Ukrainians are 24.4%. Crimea is also a homeland for Crimean Tatars who were forcibly expelled to Central Asia by Stalin in 1940s. They began to return in the early 1990s. In 2001, they constituted 12.5% of the population of Crimea. Due to its long history of conquest and colonization, Crimea is also a homeland for other ethnic groups – Belorussians, Armenians, Jews, Azeris, Greeks, Bulgarians, Germans and so on – who are around 5% of the total population.

Second, Crimea is a region where Russian is spoken more widely than any other

language, and also by different non-Russian minorities. It has official status according to the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC). Around 77% consider Russian to be their native language, while only 10% choose Ukrainian and 11% Crimean Tatar. Russian is in fact the only language used in the public administration in Crimea; even though Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar have the same status according to the ARC Constitution they are rarely used. Russian is the dominant language for the media in Crimea (there are 987 Russian-language printed media in Crimea, while only 5 are published in Ukrainian and 4 in Crimean Tatar) and education (only 5.4% of pupils attend Ukrainian schools, a dominant majority are taught in Russian, and there is not a single school that teaches in Crimean Tatar).

Third, Crimea has political autonomy as granted by the Constitution of Ukraine and confirmed in the Constitution of the ARC (the only region of Ukraine which has such an act). The ARC is a part of Ukraine and even though it does not have sovereignty it has independence in decision-making on a number of issues. It has its own parliament, which appoints and designates a Prime Minister, a head of the Government of the ARC, with the consent of the President of Ukraine.

Even though in the Ukrainian referendum on independence in 1991 54.19% of residents from Crimea and 57.07% from Sevastopol city voted in favour of Ukrainian independence, the period of the early 1990s was marked by separatist movements. In 1993 the Crimean Government introduced the post of President of Crimea. A pro-Russian candidate who was elected to this post disbanded the Crimean Parliament and announced his control over Crimea calling for the independence of Crimea, which enjoyed the support of Russian politicians. The separatist movement in Crimea flourished as the Russian Federation did not want to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty over the peninsula in the process of negotiations on the status of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. Only the adoption of the Constitution of Ukraine in 1996 and the ratification of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership with Russia in 1997 led to an easing off of territorial tensions.

The Russian Federation's claims to Crimea stem from Russian colonization of the peninsula since the 18th century, which continued apace in the Soviet period. Initially, in 1921, the Crimean Autonomous SSR was created as a part of the Russian SFSR, and later, in 1954, Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR. The legitimacy of the latter act has been questioned by Russian politicians.

II. Potential Ethnic Conflict

The multi-ethnic region regularly experiences economic, political and ethnic conflicts. First of all, there are strong stereotypes on the side of Slav majority regarding Crimean Tatars. These stereotypes are maintained and multiplied by the Crimean media that “conducts a purposeful anti-Tatar and islamophobic information campaign”. These stereotypes are also exploited by Crimean

politicians to increase their share of the vote and local governors to satisfy their economic interests, including control over land in Crimea.

Second, the unsolved economic, social and cultural problems of the Tatar minority pushes this group towards radical forms of behavior, such as illegal land grabs, street protests and the radicalization of national movements.

The main problem facing repatriated Tatars stems from the lack of consolidated legislation in Ukraine that would renew the rights of Crimean Tatars as an aboriginal ethnic group and establish legal mechanisms and guarantees related to repatriation, settlement, distribution of land, as well as the revival of the language and culture of Crimean Tatars. The Ukrainian government has never been able to ensure respect for the Crimean Tatars' rights, nor has it ever had focused ethnic policies that might encompass all the key ethnic groups living in Ukraine today. The country's regional policies have been exclusively focused on resolving economic inequities in regional development, leaving ethnic, linguistic and other factors out.

Third, strong political, economic and media influence and the military presence of the Russian Federation in the region often serve as a factor provoking political and ethnic conflicts between Russians or Slavs and Crimean Tatars.

As a result, even economically rooted conflicts such as land disputes grow into ethnic conflicts. This was the case for the conflict between the Slav and Tatar population over Bakhchisaraj market where only the use of "Berkut" special forces managed to stop the violence on both sides from escalating in 2006. It was also the case for the demolition of the properties which had belonged to Tatars in the Ai-Petri mountain. In this case, when the private firms destroyed more than a court ruling had allowed them to, mass protest Crimean Tatar protests began over the whole peninsula in 2007.

III. Russia's Influence

Black Sea Fleet

First, the main outpost of the Russian Federation's influence in the region is the Black Sea Fleet, based at Sevastopol. The city of Sevastopol is populated by sailors, including those who have retired, and their families.

The main problem combined with the Black Sea Fleet stationing in Crimea is that it is totally beyond the control of the Ukrainian authorities. The Black Sea fleet manoeuvres during the Russian invasion of Georgia is the most recent example of this.

After the Orange Revolution, the MFA headed by Borys Tarasiuk, decided to review the conditions for the basing of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea in

accordance with the basic agreement of 1997 as a lot of economic disputes that appeared were caused by the illegal sub-letting of BSF's premises, their use of sea shore infrastructure (which grew into the so-called "lighthouses wars"), and the functioning of Russian Federation institutions, such as courts and procurators on the territory of Ukraine.

Ukraine's MFA and Defence Ministry wanted to take an inventory of Russia's Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and to take marine navigation equipment and other real property, including parcels of land, under their own control. The Ukrainian side also offered to adopt additional implementation arrangements to the basic treaty on the BSF stationing because since 1997 no agreements have been signed that clearly established the legal basis on which the Russian fleet is based in Crimea. With gas disputes between Ukraine and Russia in 2006, the Ukrainian MFA also raised the issue of rent payment for the BSF's stationing in Crimea.

Any moves by the Ukrainian side to review the conditions for the basing of the BSF ran into resistance on the part of the Russian Defence Ministry. In 2006, in response to attempts by Ukrainian officials to return lighthouses in Yalta and the Sarych bowl to Ukrainian command, Russia's Defence Ministry officials announced that "Russian" lighthouses were being invaded and began to move military personnel illegally on the territory of Ukraine. The Russian Ministry even hinted that it was prepared to use force.

The BSF subcommittee within the Interstate Yushchenko–Putin Commission was set up to agree on the conditions of the inventory and other controversial issues; however, none of its sessions have brought any results. Russia is reluctant to agree to Ukraine's demand that the use of all land and property by the BSF be properly legalized in a leasing agreement because this will open the door to raising the cost of basing the Russian Fleet there and the beginning of talks about its withdrawal after 2017.

The government of Yanukovich shelved the BSF issue and tried not to irritate Russia in face of the gas deals. This evoked hopes in Moscow for the preservation of a military presence and the influence it brought. In both its rhetoric and its message, the Russian President's declaration that the Russian Fleet would protect Ukraine's sovereignty was an echo of his statements during the Orange Revolution. Russian politicians have resurrected demands that were ignored by the Orange Governments and an extension of the agreement to base the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea after 2017 was one of them. Moreover, Victor Yanukovich as prime minister never supported, but crucially, never denied, such a possibility.

Recent statements from Russian generals show that Russia is not going to leave the Crimea after 2017: "if Russia loses the BSF presence in Crimea it will lose control over Caucasus".

Media

Crimea is situated more in the Russian media sphere than in the Ukrainian one. 51 towns and villages in Crimea do not have coverage by the main national channels of Ukraine. Given the lack of Ukrainian media products, Crimea is covered by foreign media (Russian, Turkish and Bulgarian), this is particularly the case by the South Sea Shore.

As is well known, the image of Ukraine in the Russian media is extremely hostile. Ukraine's very sovereignty over the Crimea is questioned. Another problem is that the Russian media transmit a message of threats to Russia and the Russian speaking population of Crimea, caused by Ukrainianization and the repatriation of Crimean Tatars.

There are also Russian economic interests in the region. Russia takes first place in the FDI to the region. The main domains of expansion are real estate, construction, tourism and financial services.

Pro-Russian NGOs and Political Parties

Russian-oriented political forces have a majority in the Crimean parliament. "The Block for Yanukovych" composed of the Party of Regions, the Russian bloc and the Russian Community of Crimea won the 2006 elections to the parliament and formed a coalition together with ultra-left Natalia Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Party "Union" ("Soyuz") as well as the bloc "Ne Tak!" (Not So!).

All these parties are against Ukraine's NATO integration and support the use of Russian as a second state language. Moreover, PSPU, CPU, "Union" and the two pro-Russian parties that formed Mr. Yanukovych's bloc support the idea of reunification between Russia and Ukraine.

The opposition in the Crimean parliament is weak (20 seats of 100), and divided, which reflects divisions at the national level: Crimean Tatar "Kurultaj" is united with Narodnyi Rukh (Borys Tarasiuk), BYUT has a separate faction, Nasha Ukraina has not entered the parliament, and there is also an opposition faction led by the former Crimean Prime Minister Sergiy Kunitsyn.

The above-mentioned Russian Community of Crimea is the largest NGO in Ukraine that is funded by the Russian government (e.g. Moscow major Yuriy Luzhkov's Foundation "Moscow – Crimea") and has a close contacts with the RF President's administration and among Russian politicians (e.g. its head Sergey Tsekov, a member of the presidium, is on councils with his compatriots for the Moscow government and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

In 2005, the leaders of the Russian Community of Crimea (RCC) became members of the Party of Regions in Crimea and due to this could enter the Crimean Parliament in 2006 and participate in the public policy. Together with the Russian Block, the RCC obtained more than 30% of the seats in the elections list of the Bloc for Yanukovich! Sergiy Tsekov was elected a vice speaker of the Crimean Parliament.

Every year the financing of the RCC by Russia is growing as Sergey Tsekov recognized. Due to the lack of financial transparency it is difficult to distinguish when Russia's funds go to the support of cultural activities and when they go to the electoral campaign.

RCC supports the idea of Crimea together with Ukraine being a part of "a great state" with dual citizenship between Ukraine and Russia, Russian as a second state language and the continuation of the stationing of the BSF in Crimea. It is against NATO and hostile to Crimean Tatars. Furthermore, in 2005 the RCC within the Bloc for Yanukovich initiated an organization for a Crimean referendum on the status of Russian language in Crimea and declared it would lobby for a referendum on Russian as a second state language. RCC organized protests against the international naval exercises, operation "Sea Breeze 2006", in Feodosia with anti-NATO slogans.

RCC leaders are also suspected of provoking violence in the conflict between the Slav and Tatar population at the Bakhchisaraj market. In other words, RCC reflect the interests of the RF government.

RCC has an extensive network throughout the Crimea and since 2007 has aspired to build an all-Ukrainian pro-Russian organization (the All-Ukrainian Council of Russian Compatriots). It has also good relations with the Crimean Cossack Union, a paramilitary NGO in Crimea of pro-Russian orientation that supports relations with similar organizations in Transnistria, Abkhazia and Ossetia. RCC has also its youth organization.

Apart from RCC, there are other pro-Russian organizations operating in Crimea: "Bohdan Khmelnytsky's successors", led by the leader of Crimean Communists Leonid Grach, radical movements National Front "Sevastopol-Crimea-Russia", Eurasian Youth Union and "Break-through" ("Proryv"), which is banned by Ukraine's Security Service but still functioning. In some of them, such as "Proryv", leading militants are Russian Federation citizens. "Proryv" and the Eurasian Youth Movement claim to operate also in Georgia and Moldova.

All these organizations and movements are quite marginal on the political map of Crimea, except for the Russian Community of Crimea which now is a political player. Due to interconnections between them and political and financial support from Russia they can be easily used as a tool of pressure on Ukraine if there is a

reason to do so, for example, they might resist the withdrawal of the Black Sea Fleet in 2017 or Ukraine's move towards NATO. Furthermore, due to the participation of pro-Russian organizations in the electoral process and in the government coalition and self-governance in Crimea, they will be able to form a public policy agenda in more legitimate way.

Lack of Control from Kyiv

The government in Kyiv cannot manage to integrate Crimea in Ukraine's political and social context nor can it resist growing influence from Russia. First of all, the national government lacks leverages to make Crimean authorities even implement national policies at the local level. As the former Representative of the President of Ukraine in Crimea said, every National Security and Defence Council meeting can only state the fact that its previous decisions on Crimea have not been implemented: "Crimean authorities throw these decisions away as they have never been punished".

Second, national policies often meet resistance at the Crimean level because the Kyiv government rather suffers from a too unified approach to this distinct region and is too repressive methods in the introduction of some policies. This was the case with the decision of the Minister of Education to introduce school graduation tests only in the Ukrainian language, even though Crimean pupils are poorly taught in Ukrainian. It was the case with the following decision of the Minister of Education when it was decided over a short term to expand teaching in Ukrainian as a reaction to the poor results of Crimean students in the tests. Both Russian and Crimean Tatars teachers' organizations protested against this decision.

The Kyiv authorities do too little to set up a regular dialogue with Crimean authorities and stakeholders, to hold consultations and look for compromise. Moreover, political divisions in the Ukrainian government, particularly between BYUT and Our Ukraine, weakens their strength at the Crimean level and draws too much attention to the political problems and policy ones. Only the Party of Regions maintains dialogue with the Crimean authorities within its party structures, but this dialogue rather aims at guaranteeing electoral support from the region than solving economic and social problems or integrating Crimea into Ukraine.

IV. After Georgia: Possible Scenarios

The Crimean Party of Regions organization which constitutes the majority in the Parliament of ARC was the first to support Victor Yanukovich's statement on the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Given the media situation in Crimea and the general attitude towards Russia, this decision reflects the opinion of the majority of Crimean population (there is no regional public opinion polls results at the moment to confirm this point).

There are signs that the revision of the status of Crimea can be considered by Russia if the Ukrainian government continues its “anti-Russian” policy. First, Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine has become more aggressive. Demands for a revision of the Russia-Ukraine Grand Treaty of 1997 regarding the status of Sevastopol and Crimea have become more frequent. Second, the Russian media create an image of Ukraine as an enemy country particularly hostile to the Russian-speaking population or of a country that would split apart because of political and ethnic conflicts. Some nationalistic media even consider the possibility of military intervention to Ukraine.

There are several scenarios for how Russia could exert its influence on Ukraine through Crimea:

- First, provocation of ethnic conflict followed by Russian intervention to prevent genocide of the Russian population or citizens (according to Stepan Havrysh, a deputy secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, they are around 100,000 Russian citizens in Crimea with a dual citizenship). Although the RCC claims a higher figure of 170,000. Many more citizens of the peninsular are eligible for Russian passports and would be regarded as a Russian citizen living abroad, even if they hold a Ukrainian one as well. In the words of one Embassy official, ‘If an individual has a passport of Russia ... for us he is a citizen of Russia. And that’s all’.
- Second, various seditious activities aimed at the protection of Russian citizens or the Russian population’s rights: diplomatic pressure or the organization of inner political pressure up to a potential referendum on independence. Pretexts for such activities could be Ukraine’s demand that Russia withdraw the BSF after 2017, Ukraine’s move to NATO, or the language issue.
- Third, territorial conflict provoked by the review of the treaty on the Black Sea Fleet, the status of Sevastopol or a forced solution to finalize the on-going negotiations on the sea border.