

The Crimean Crisis in the Context of New Russian Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT *Over the past months, the crisis in Crimea presented the world with a case study on how rapidly national borders may shift in the 21st century. The turmoil in Ukraine began in November 2013 as widespread protests erupted following a last-minute decision by former president Viktor Yanukovych's to suspend talks on a trade pact with the European Union under pressure from the Russian government. The pro-Russian leadership in Crimea organized an impromptu referendum where the vast majority of participants voted in favor of uniting with the Russian Federation. This article provides an analysis of recent developments in Crimea in the context of Russian policy in the region.*

Introduction

A number of relatively stable parts of the world began to experience previously unseen problems in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration. During this period, Crimea, a peninsula of particular strategic and geopolitical importance, was contested by Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Having deported the native Tatar population from the peninsula in the 1940s, the Russian government embarked on an ambitious plan to reclaim Crimea and pushed the region to the top of its global political agenda. Currently, ethnic Russians – which constitute a majority – seek to control the future of the Crimean peninsula, as Moscow's open and covert support for Russian separatists in the area continues to pay off. In response, the Crimean Tatars, who were removed from their homeland during the Stalin era, voiced their concern about Russia's annexation of Crimea as they believe that the latest developments will affect their future negatively.

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 16 / No. 2 /
2014, pp. 167-181

A Brief History of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars

Crimea's geopolitical position as a convenient transit route between Asia and Eastern Europe as well as a major commercial center allowed the peninsula to maintain its significance throughout the centuries and resulted in continued interest from various states and communities.

In the 4th century AD, Emperor Attila of the European Huns conquered the Crimean peninsula and ushered in various Turkic groups, including the Huns, the Khazars, the Bulgarians, the Pechenegs, the Kipchaks, the Mongols and the Tatars, which eventually constituted the majority of the local population. The Eurasian Avars and the Khazars reached Crimea by the 6th and 8th centuries, respectively. Following the latter group's arrival in the peninsula, the area came under the rule of the state of Khazaria until 1083. While part of the Pechenegs population proceeded deeper into the Balkans, the rest settled around Crimea in the early 10th century. Later, the Kipchaks defeated the Pechenegs to claim Crimea and ruled the area for another two centuries. It was during this period that the Islamic faith spread across the peninsula. In the 12th century, a large number of Turkish merchants from the Anatolian Seljuk Empire relocated to Crimea. Initial official relations between the Seljuks and Crimea, however, date back to the year 1221, when Amir Hüsameddin Çoban of the Anatolian Seljuk Empire launched a military campaign to capture the peninsula. In 1239, Crimea was conquered by the Golden Horde, whose Tatar tribes settled in Crimea to mix with the local population. It was during this period that the Turkic residents of the peninsula came to be known as Tatars since the lineage of Crimean khans could be traced to Genghis Khan of the Mongol Empire. It was in the first half of the 15th century when a separate khanate of Crimea emerged. Founded by Hacı I Giray, the Crimean Khanate enjoyed close relations with the Ottoman Empire. In 1475, Sultan Mehmed II ordered the Ottoman navy, under admiral Gedik Ahmed Pasha, to conquer all Genovese ports in Caffa and Crimea and install Mengli I Giray –who agreed to pay tribute to the Ottomans – as the khan of Crimea. Ottoman control of Crimea, which began with this event, continued until the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, which ended with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. In 1783, Catherine the Great abolished the Crimean Khanate and annexed its territories into the Russian Empire. Under Tzarist rule, the Crimean Turks were displaced by waves of Slavic immigrants as the Russian authorities embarked on a campaign to eliminate Turkish culture in the region. In line with the *Greek Plan*, Catherine II replaced Turkish names in Crimea with mostly Greek words as Akmescid became Simferopol and Akıyar turned into Sevastopol.

Under the rule of Catherine the Great, however, the Russian Empire's policies grew softer and, along with the country's economic development, ush-

ered in a period of scientific progress and gave rise to the Jadidism movement. The movement, which became increasingly more influential throughout the 1880s, influenced not only Crimean Tatars but also Turkic communities across the Russian Empire. Led by Ismail Gasprinski, Jadidism represented a form of national awakening and modernization. By the 1910s, a group of Crimean Turks initiated an underground struggle against Tzarist Russia. Meanwhile, Crimean students, such as Noman Çelebicihan and Cafer Seydamet Qırımer, residing in the Ottoman capital formed the organization *Vatan* (Homeland). When the Russian Empire disintegrated in 1917, Crimea became independent and Noman Çelebicihan, the Mufti of Crimea, was elected president. Yet, months later, the Bolshevik forces invaded Crimea and proceeded to arrest and execute Çelebicihan. Later, the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Crimea was established on October 18, 1921.

The pro-Russian leadership in Crimea organized an impromptu referendum where the vast majority of participants voted in favor of uniting with the Russian Federation

Shortly after clashes between Russia and Germany began in the World War II, the German 11th Army entered Crimea in October 1941 and proceeded to conquer the entire peninsula, with the notable exception of Sevastopol, in less than a month. Sevastopol eventually fell on July 4, 1942 after months of intense battles. As Germany's military campaign gradually lost momentum, Soviet troops reclaimed the Crimean peninsula on April 10, 1944 and imposed severe pressure on the Crimean Tatar population as a large number of Turks perished.¹ The Soviet government's justification for its actions in Crimea was that the local population had collaborated with the German military. On April 20, 1944, the regional committee of the Crimean Communist Party decided to establish an emergency commission tasked with identifying German collaborators. The resulting official reports are believed to have paved the way for the mass deportation of Crimean Turks from their homeland. Following the liberation of Crimea from German invasion, the Soviet government embarked on an ambitious project to cleanse the area of non-Slavic communities and therefore deported the Crimean Tatars. The mass deportation of Crimean Tatars, which started on May 18, 1944, began with the arrests of individuals deemed potentially dangerous by the authorities. The vast majority of targeted citizens were women, children and the elderly. Some of the remaining deportees included Crimean Tatar soldiers that served in the Red Army. The deportation process involved the transport of Crimean Tatars to nearby train stations and their subsequent travel in cargo trains, which resulted in widespread disease and a significantly high death toll.² Until 1967, deported Crimean Tatars were not even allowed to visit the peninsula for touristic purposes.³



Putin while signing a treaty about the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation.
AA / A. Nikolskiy

A relatively better situation for the Crimean Tatars emerged under Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who issued a declaration on April 28, 1956 to free a number of ethnic groups including the Crimean Tatars from deportation. It was also during the Khrushchev period that various groups that had been deported by the Stalin regime earned the right to return to their homeland. The Crimean Turks, however, represented an exception to the newly-introduced rules and therefore sought to organize a popular struggle to return to their native land. For this purpose, the Crimean Tatar community established an *Enterprise Group* in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, whose activities included writing application letters to the authorities in order to travel to their homeland. A direct consequence of the group's efforts came in August 1965, when the Soviet government allowed the Crimean Turks to spend their summer vacation in the peninsula. However, it was not until 1987 that the Soviet authorities admitted to injustice and criminal conduct toward the Crimean Tatar population after the community's impressive demonstrations at the Red Square.⁴ Later, the Soviet government allowed the Crimean Tatar community to return to Crimea and established official committees to address their problems. The committees and, by extension, the Soviet state failed to take any serious steps to remedy the Crimean Tatar population's problems in later years.

The 5th General Assembly of the Enterprise Groups, which convened in Tashkent on May 2, 1989, established the Crimean Tatar National Council and elected Mustafa Abduldzemil Dzhemilev as its president. The organization established tent cities in the Crimean peninsula from 1989 onwards in order to

promote Tatar immigration back to their native land. On June 26, 1991, the Crimean Tatar National Council was recognized as the highest representative body of the Crimean Tatar community during its second congress in Simferopol. On October 27, 2013, Dzhemilev passed over the presidency to Refat Chubarov. Finally, on April 15, 2014, President Abdullah Gül of Turkey presented Dzhemilev with the Order of the Republic.⁵

Russian Foreign Policy Towards Crimea

Pro-Russian associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been particularly influential elements in Russia's foreign policy toward the Crimean peninsula. Over the past years, pro-Russian groups protested the Ukrainian government's ultra-nationalist policies and sought to justify their separatist campaigns based on the premise that Ukrainian authorities had been unwilling to recognize and protect their cultural rights. It was the opposition to these nationalist policies that formed the basis of pro-Russian rallies and gatherings in the Ukraine.

A large number of associations and institutions continue to play a key role in defending Russia's actions in Crimea. Organizing demonstrations and pro-Russian rallies, such groups, including the Russian Community of Crimea (Русская община Крыма)⁶, have been advocating the view that Crimea should reunite with the Russian Federation.⁷ The same organizations have also been staunch opponents of outreach efforts by the EU, the United States and Turkey in the Crimean peninsula. Pro-Russian political parties, too, have consolidated Russia's position in the region and exerted considerable influence over the peninsula's administration.

Another important component of Russian policy toward Crimea has been the protection of historic buildings and artifacts which constitute evidence of Russian culture in the peninsula. In light of the above, the guiding principle of Russia's policies towards Crimea has been the notion that the region indeed belongs to Russia – an approach that caused Moscow to support the ethnic Russian population in the area and treat pressing issues in Crimea as part of its domestic affairs.

The Orange Revolution (2004)

A series of efforts by PORA, a civic youth organization with alleged ties to the Soros Foundation, and certain NGOs such as Freedom House and the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation resulted in the annulment of the 2004 presidential elections, which resulted in a victory for Viktor Yanukovich, based on claims

The last-minute decision by former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to suspend talks on an association agreement with the EU triggered mass protests in the country

of election fraud and voter intimidation.⁸ A run-off election held on November 21, 2004 – which Yanukovich won – resulted in a political crisis as Viktor Yushchenko and his supporters objected to the results. The standoff was resolved on December 4, 2004 when the Ukrainian Parliament passed a number of constitutional amendments. At the height of the political deadlock, hundreds of thousands of young, pro-opposition activists organized mass rallies around *democracy* and *freedom*. Meanwhile, Ukrainian and international media outlets portrayed Ukraine as a country whose population was pro-Western, pro-freedom and pro-democracy. As a result of widespread protests, the Supreme Court of Ukraine ruled in favor of a re-run ballot where

Viktor Yushchenko won 52 percent of the vote with no irregularities according to international observers.⁹ It was under such circumstances that Yushchenko, a known proponent of the U.S. and the EU, assumed the country's top political position following a bloodless revolution.

2010: A Crucial Year

Our discussion of the developments in the Crimea in 2010 must first touch upon the Ukrainian presidential election that took place on January 17, 2010. In recent years, popular elections in former Soviet republics have had repercussions beyond national politics, as the polls tend to determine whether a given country opted for Russia or the Western world in terms of foreign policy. As such, the future of Crimea – an uncontested Ukrainian territory at the time – closely depended on these developments. Over the years, Crimea received particular attention from observers due to the continued presence of a Russian military base in the autonomous republic and a controversy surrounding Russian operations in the area. More specifically, the decision between a pro-Russian and a pro-Western president in Ukraine would have played a major role in the country's decision to extend the lease on the Russian military base. Following his election, President Yanukovich's policies reflected the above-described choice between Russia and the West. One of Yanukovich's first orders of business was to extend the mandate of the Russian military base for another 25 years. An agreement to that effect was signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on April 21, 2010.¹⁰ An additional clause in the agreement allowed the Russian base to remain on Ukrainian soil for an additional five years after the original 25-year lease, until 2047. In return, the Ukrainian government received an additional discount on Russian gas shipments. Keeping in mind that Crimea serves as the main

channel for Russian exports to the Black Sea, a continued Russian presence in the autonomous republic carried special significance for Moscow, which paid particular attention to maintaining its influence over the Black Sea. The matter was so crucial to the Russian government that Moscow's delegation dismissed a number of Ukrainian offers during bilateral talks over natural gas exports and instead directly demanded an extension of the military base's authorization in return for additional discounts on energy.

The Crimean parliamentary vote on October 21, 2010 marked another key development for the peninsula, when the Party of Regions (Партія регіонів) claimed 80 seats. The Communist Party of Ukraine, the Qurultai-Rukh and Soyuz each won five seats in the Supreme Council of Crimea. The landslide victory for the Party of Regions led observers to remark that Crimea was shifting toward the Ukraining central government which, over the long term, would terminate its status as an autonomous republic and instead create a federal state of Crimea – an issue that created tensions between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian figures in the peninsula over the next months. At an international conference in October 2010 on the status of Crimea, pro-Russian participants, including sitting members of the State Duma, Russian politicians and political experts, demanded that the Ukrainian Constitution be amended to grant greater autonomy to Crimea. In response, pro-Ukrainian figures called for an end to the peninsula's autonomous status and the establishment of a unitary administrative system in the country. The development in Crimea unsettled the ethnic Russian population in the region, who frequently claimed that the ruling party won elections by handing out public tenders. Another popular claim was that the Ukrainian government, concerned about the possibility of greater turmoil, permitted pro-Russian activists to organize protests in Simferopol.

Following Yanukovych's rise to power, the Ukrainian government's policy toward the Crimean Tatars took a turn for the worse. In 1944, the native Crimean community was removed from the peninsula while the Soviet government made it illegal for Crimean Tatars to return to their homeland. When the ban was lifted decades later, the returning Tatars encountered various challenges, including attacks on mosques and a statue that commemorates the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars from their native land.

Crimea's Relevance to Russia and Ukraine

Russia's interest in the Crimean peninsula dates back to the 18th century, when the Russian Empire's prolonged struggle to gain access to the Black Sea region during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796) yielded results with the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774. Nine years later, the Russian Empire annexed Crimea. Another manifestation of Russo-Turkish contesta-

tion over the peninsula was the Crimean War of 1853-56. For centuries, the Black Sea represented a particularly important region for Moscow as a bridge-head to the Bosphorus Strait, the Dardanelles and the Mediterranean – key components for the Russian objective of gaining access to warm waters. Over the years, Russian policy toward the Bosphorus and the Mediterranean followed a two-pronged approach that varied according to the country's power and influence at the time: when Russians believed themselves to be relatively weak, they approached the question of the Mediterranean and the Bosphorus Strait as a matter of national security and sought to pressure the Turkish government to prevent foreign ships from entering the Black Sea; relatively stronger Russian governments aimed to cross the straits and control the Mediterranean in an attempt to curb French influence over the Middle East and threaten Britain's access to India.¹¹

Following the October revolution, Russia's withdrew from World War I, declared pre-revolutionary international agreements null and void, and sought to join a new political system to usher in a new era. The recently-established Soviet government remained committed to a protectionist stance toward the Bosphorus Strait until the end of World War II and sided with the Turkish government against Western powers. Seeking to use its victory as leverage, however, the Soviet Union demanded a military base in the Bosphorus Strait as early as 1946. Unable to pressure Turkey into submission, the Soviets proceeded to establish an unrivalled navy in the Black Sea tasked with gaining access to the Mediterranean. Moscow's pursuit of closer relations with the Syrian government, coupled with the establishment of a Russian naval base in Tartus, arguably represented components of the same Soviet strategy. More recently, Russian assistance to the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria against the backdrop of the Arab Spring revolutions manifested, among other things, Moscow's ongoing commitment to the traditional Russian naval strategy.

Russia's additional emphasis on naval power since Vladimir Putin's rise to power became evident in the area of national security, foreign policy and military doctrine at certain times over the past two decades. The Putin administration adopted various strategic documents over this period, including the Russian Naval Doctrine-2020, which came into force on July 27, 2001.¹² The document noted that Russia remained one of the major naval forces in the world due to its history and geographical location as well as simultaneous access to three oceans around the world. The doctrine, thus drawing attention to the country's naval power, listed a number of precautions that Moscow had to take in order to maintain its superiority and arguably made the case for Russian naval fleets sailing waters across the globe.

The doctrine also identified Sevastopol, whose lease was renewed until 2042, as a key military base for the Black Sea fleet. Meanwhile, Alexander Fedotenkov,



Pro-Russian fighters of Vostok (East) battalion rip apart an Ukrainian flag outside a regional state building in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk on May 29, 2014.

AFP / Viktor Drachev

Deputy Admiral for the Black Sea fleet, announced on May 11, 2013 that his country intended to stay in Sevastopol after the expiration date.¹³ In addition to the Russian naval base at Sevastopol, Moscow established additional bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 in an attempt to consolidate its dominant position in the Black Sea region.

From Turkey's standpoint, the Russian presence in the Mediterranean has become more disturbing in light of Moscow's decision to station naval fleets in Crimea and Georgia. The Russian Naval Doctrine-2020 developed a new approach to traditional naval strategy by emphasizing the role of naval routes in exporting Russian energy to international markets. The Nord Stream in the Baltic Sea, along with the South Stream and the Blue Stream in the Black Sea, represent practical manifestations of the Russian naval strategy described above.

Over the past two decades, the Russian government took a number of steps to update its traditional naval strategy with changing global circumstances and its own strategic objectives. Against the backdrop of this process of transformation, the Black Sea region has become increasingly important as a core area of global and regional competition. Furthermore, the Black Sea has historically been one of the hotbeds of Russo-Turkish competition.

After the Soviet Union's disintegration, however, traditional competition between Turkey and Russia continued alongside closer cooperation and bilateral relations. While Russian military bases in Sevastopol and Abkhazia, coupled

with Moscow's plans regarding Crimea, represent negative developments for the Turkish government, Russia has been disturbed by Turkey's superiority in the Black Sea, closer bilateral relations between Turkey and Georgia, and Turkey's support for the admission of Romania and Bulgaria to NATO. Despite these problems, the two countries have voiced mutual opposition to U.S. advances into the Black Sea region, while furthering their economic cooperation by launching joint projects such as the Blue Stream and the Southern Stream.

Meanwhile, the Russian government's traditional pursuit of gaining access to warm waters remains intact and up-to-date with contemporary circumstances. In this respect, the Black Sea continues to represent a key component of Russian naval strategy, while Crimea serves as a convenient transport route between Russia and its partner countries in the Near East and southern Europe.

Furthermore, the Crimean peninsula has a vast potential for transportation as well as rich mineral resources. The peninsula's mild climate also makes it an ideal vacation spot for millions of Russians. Finally, the area offers strategic value to the Russian Federation as a port city – a role that Crimea played during the Cold War.

Following the August 1991 coup and the secession of Soviet republics, the Soviet Union completely disintegrated, rendering Crimea an autonomous republic of the now-independent Ukraine. The ethnic Russian population of the peninsula, however, immediately began campaigning for Crimean independence and subsequent reunification with the Russian Federation. Similarly, nationalist forces in the Russian Federation voiced support for Crimea's Russian community. The continued presence of the main naval base of the former Soviet Union in Sevastopol turned the status of Crimea into a key dispute between the Ukrainian government and the Russian Federation.

According to the Budapest Memorandum signed by the U.S., the U.K., the Russian Federation and Ukraine on December 5, 1994, the Ukrainian government would discard its nuclear arsenal in return for the signatory states' pledge to safeguard the nation's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Russia violated Ukraine's territorial integrity just two decades later. The current situation would suggest that Russia's transgressions will continue in the foreseeable future.

Another key international agreement was signed on June 9, 1995 by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. According to the treaty, the Soviet Union's Black Sea fleet would be divided between Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine's share of the fleet would subsequently be transferred to the Russian Federation in compensation for Kiev's undue energy bills. An even more significant aspect of this agreement was that the parties concluded the Sochi Protocol that recognized Crimea's status as a Ukrainian territory.

Crimea's Relevance to Turkey

Turkey's policies toward Crimea remain largely limited to cultural, economic and social initiatives. In this regard, it would be difficult to claim that the Turkish government assists, as do Russian authorities, any separatist groups operating in the peninsula. This point is of particular importance since Turkey's position regarding Crimea could have a direct influence on its bilateral relations with the Ukrainian government. Meanwhile, the peninsula plays a crucial role in Turkey's national security and policies regarding the Black Sea. To put things in perspective, Crimea is as important to Turkey's national security in the Black Sea region as Cyprus is to its security in the Mediterranean. Another key aspect for Turkey, of course, relates to its shared ethnic, linguistic and traditional heritage with the Crimeans that remains intact despite the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire due to the mass migration of Crimean Tatars to Turkey, which they tend to call "the white lands." A sizeable Crimean Tatar community continues to reside in Turkey today.



The Russian government's most recent moves have also created concern in a number of countries, including Kazakhstan, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic republics

Recent Developments

The Crimean population, which approximately amounts to 1,967,000, consists of ethnic Russians (58 percent), Ukrainians (24 percent) and Crimean Turks (14 percent). The ethnic composition of the Crimean population played a major role in the developments described below.

The last-minute decision by former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to suspend talks on an association agreement with the EU triggered mass protests in the country. Following initial demonstrations in the Ukrainian capital, pro-European groups organized rallies across the country despite a court-sanctioned ban on public protests that compelled Yanukovich to flee the country. Meanwhile, pro-Russian groups occupied public offices, including the Crimean Parliament, the Prime Ministry and other key institutions, as well as private buildings. With Russian backing, these groups lowered the Ukrainian flag in official buildings and replaced it with the Russian flag.

On March 16, 2014, pro-Russian groups organized a referendum on Crimea's status, whose outcome was obvious from the start. The independence vote, which 99 percent of Crimean Turks boycotted, yielded 97-percent support for the peninsula's reunification with the Russian Federation – an outcome that a

number of Western governments, including the U.S. and Turkey, do not recognize. Russian President Vladimir Putin, nonetheless, proceeded to sign into force a draft law regarding the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and the establishment of new federal territories during a ceremony at the famous Ekaterininsky Hall inside the Kremlin Palace two days after the referendum. The State Duma and the Russian Federation Council approved the plan on March 20 and 21, 2014, respectively. In response to these developments, Western government stood idly by while announcing certain sanctions against Russia

Keeping in mind Russian attempts to regain influence over the former Soviet territories, it is particularly important for Turkey to develop closer political, cultural and economic ties with the region

that are unlikely to harm the hostile government's interests in the short-term. The proposed steps included restrictions on Russian finance and the free movement of Russians in Europe, Moscow's exclusion from future G8 summits, and a suspension of military and civilian relations with the Russian government. (The final measure was adopted at a meeting of NATO ministers of foreign

affairs in Brussels on April 1, 2014.) It remains questionable at best to suggest that any steps by Western governments will persuade Russia to retreat. Briefly put, Moscow has clearly been able to impose its terms on opponents to emerge victorious in Crimea.

In response to the aforementioned developments, the Crimean Tatar National Council organized an emergency meeting on March 29, 2014 in Bakhchysarai, where the participants adopted a resolution "initiating necessary legal and political processes for the Crimean Tatars' attainment of national and regional autonomy in their historic fatherland." The same resolution authorized the Crimean Tatar National Council to establish contact with various international organizations including the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Members of the Council reasoned that only international guarantees could safeguard the Crimean Tatar community in the region.

Following the Crimean Tatar National Council's resolution, Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev, who served as a member of the Ukrainian Parliament since 1988, was denied entry into Crimea by Russian security forces stationed in the area. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the debacle with a written statement maintaining that "there was no legitimate grounds nor explanation for the prevention of Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev's entry into his native land of Crimea," while noting that the Turkish government "was concerned about and condemned this unacceptable practice."¹⁴

Following the prevention of Dzhemilev's entry into the Crimea, a public prosecutor in the region reportedly launched an investigation into the activities of the Crimean Tatar National Council headed by Refat Chubarov.¹⁵

On May 9, President Putin travelled to Crimea to participate in a Victory Day parade to commemorate the Soviet victory over the Nazi forces. Noting that Crimea's reunification with Russia was "a historic truth," Putin claimed that 2014 would go down in history as "a year when the local population chose to be with Russia and affirmed their loyalty to historic truth."¹⁶

Two days later, pro-Russian groups in Lugansk and Donetsk organized referendums regarding the formation of the People's Republic of Lugansk and Donetsk, respectively, and their declaration of independence from Ukraine. Following the referendum, the newly-established People's Republic of Donetsk announced that it would unite with the Russian Federation.¹⁷ In response, the EU and the U.S. stated that they would declare the outcome null and void due to the illegality of the vote, and Brussels adopted additional economic sanctions on Russia.¹⁸

On May 13, 2014, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met with Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and former head of the Crimean Tatar National Council, along with an official delegation of the organization's members. Noting that Turkey's policies toward Crimea have always relied on principles, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu maintained that "what matters the most is to find a solution to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine which is peaceful by nature, through diplomatic means and with respect to the country's territorial integrity." Davutoğlu also recalled his government's ongoing efforts with regard to the situation in Crimea at the UN, the OSCE, the EU, the Council of Europe and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to make the point that "safeguarding the presence of Crimean Tatars in the peninsula and their enjoyment of their political, economic and cultural rights as equal citizens of Ukraine represents a priority for our government." During the meeting, Davutoğlu stated that the Turkish government appreciated Dzhemilev's efforts, with whom they maintain regular contact, and argued that "he should be able to return to the Crimea as the leader of the Turkish community in the peninsula." Dzhemilev, in response, noted that Turkey played an important role in the recent crisis, while reminding the Turkish Foreign Ministers that the Crimean Tatars welcomed and relied on the Turkish government's efforts.¹⁹

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the Russian Federation established the Commonwealth of Independent States on December 17, 1991

in an attempt to keep newly established republics under the Kremlin's control. The country's subsequent "near abroad" (ближнее зарубежье) policy also aimed to increase Russia's influence in former Soviet countries. In the face of Western advances in the newly-independent republics, the Russian government effectively used ethnic Russian communities dispersed across the former Soviet territories as an instrument to pressure their respective governments. The country also strived to incorporate additional governments into a customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The fact that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were the first countries to recognize Russia's annexation of the Crimea would provide particularly interesting insights into the ways in which Moscow pressures nearby governments through various channels.

The South Ossetia War of 2008 established that the Russian government would not refrain from utilizing military force within its sphere of influence and in areas of interest. When tensions between Russia and Georgia rapidly turned into open warfare, the latter lost all territorial claims over Abkhazia and South Ossetia while failing to receive adequate support from the U.S. and the EU. In this respect, Russia tested the West's willingness and ability to engage in military confrontation. Furthermore, we must take the influence of President Putin into account. Having single-handedly ruled the Russian Federation for the past 14 years in an imperial fashion and a well-known admiration for the Czarist period, one of Putin's key objectives has long been the reunification of Eastern Ukraine with Russia. Contemporary developments in Kharkiv, Donetsk and Lugansk thus deserve close attention against the backdrop of the Putin administration's foreign policy toward the region. The Russian government's most recent moves have also created concern in a number of countries, including Kazakhstan, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic republics.²⁰

Considering Russia's long-standing interest in the Bosphorus Strait as part of a broader agenda to gain control of warm water ports, the Turkish government has repeatedly pointed out that all countries must respect and abide by the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, a 1936 agreement which regulates the passage of naval warships through the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles.

Keeping in mind Russian attempts to regain influence over the former Soviet territories, it is particularly important for Turkey to develop closer political, cultural and economic ties with the region, where a sizeable Turkic and Muslim community resides. The Turkish government, furthermore, must diversify its energy suppliers in an attempt to curb its dependence on Russian natural gas and oil since rising tensions in the region will inevitably influence Turkey's position. Having thus far advocated the territorial integrity of countries struggling with political turmoil, Ankara should maintain its stance and develop

alternative solutions in pursuit of an active role in post-conflict negotiations. In this regard, Turkey must continue its dialogue with the Russian government for the sake of the region's future. ■

Endnotes

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216 pages • Paperback
ISBN: 978-605-4023-32-5

This volume is the product of the SETA Foundation at Washington DC's second Young Scholars on Turkey (YSOT) Conference held in Washington, D.C. on February 5, 2013. The YSOT Program organizes several events throughout the year, the highlight of which is the annual conference. Bringing together young scholars from the academic and policy worlds to the nation's capital, the program aims to foster meaningful and up-to-date research and ideas on Turkish politics, history and foreign policy, and seeks to engage both academics and policy makers working on Turkey.

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