

# Everyday Life after Annexation: The Autonomous Republic of Crimea

Written by Greta Uehling

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## Everyday Life after Annexation: The Autonomous Republic of Crimea

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GRETA UEHLING, MAR 20 2015

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Imagine for a moment that tanks roll into your state. Armed and masked men without military insignia occupy your city streets. The airport is closed. Then, after a hasty vote, a new leader, someone you understood was part of the criminal underworld, is promoted to the top executive position. Suddenly, you must turn your clocks back two full hours to correspond with the new capital, some 1,400 kilometres away. Your ATM card stops working, and then your bank closes. Familiar foods, foods you have been eating your entire life, are banned and disappear from grocery store shelves to be replaced with foreign ones. Your medication becomes six times more expensive than before. Then your cell phone stops working, and you must find a new carrier to regain service. The television station you relied on for nightly news closes. You are told you have three months to turn in your passport for a new one, or you may not be able to renew your driver's license or return to your home after travel. This chaotic and liminal situation is not, of course, hypothetical. It is what happened to residents of Crimea following annexation by the Russian Federation.

The specific details are now clear: beginning in February 2014, convoys of Russian tanks and military personnel carriers rolled into the southern Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. The men who jumped out toted the most modern of Russian weapons, took over the international airport in the capital city of Simferopol and, after a stand-off, gained control of the port at Sevastopol, where the Black Sea Fleet is stationed. They helped take over the Supreme Council of Crimea. Sergei Aksyonov, widely referred to as 'the Goblin' from the 'Salem' criminal gang, was installed as Prime Minister at this time. The Supreme Council then held a much-disputed referendum. On March 17, after the official announcement of the referendum results, the Supreme Council of Crimea adopted a resolution 'On the Independence of Crimea.' Information later leaked from Russian intelligence services suggested that only about a third of the population, in contrast to 85% as officially reported, had voted, but the process was in motion for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) to become a part of the Russian Federation. A Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Crimea was signed on March 18, 2014. Now, international maps are being re-labelled, new road signs are being mounted, and new passports are being distributed. In short, there has been a radical reconfiguration of quotidian life in Crimea.

### **Who Is Affected by the Recent Change in Power?**

As of the last census (2001), the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea was home to some 2,376,000 people. At that time, the peninsula was 58 percent Russian, 24 percent Ukrainian, and 12 percent Crimean Tatar. This is a unique mix: while Russians are a minority in Ukraine as a whole, they actually constitute a majority in the ARC. And while ethnic Ukrainians constituted a majority in Ukraine, they were a minority in the ARC. The Crimean Tatars consider

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themselves (together with the nearly vanished Karaims and Krimchaks), the indigenous people. With these demographics, all three primary ethnic groups considered themselves to be disadvantaged. Measures were taken to institutionalise respect for the rights of each group: Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar were official state languages when Crimea was part of Ukraine. It should also be noted the three primary ethnic groups share the peninsula with many other ethnic groups, including formerly deported Armenians, Bulgarians, Germans, and Greeks.

The land they share is sometimes referred to as 'the Green Isle' because it is joined to the mainland by only a narrow isthmus to the north, the Isthmus of Perekop, and the fragile Strait of Kerch to the east. Deeper in history, this island ecosystem has been home to Greek City States and Mongol Hordes. Called the 'Pearl in the Czar's Crown' by Russians, the peninsula has been coveted for centuries because of its warm water port, fertile agricultural soils, and strategic location. Not surprisingly, the southern coast in particular was sought after since antiquity: Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian, British, French, Nazi German, and Soviet Empires have all set strategic sights on controlling this region.

While the annexation has been treated as a sudden turn of geopolitical events, it is more clearly understood as a predictable event that might have been foreseen if Crimea had been a focus of attention by international relations scholars. Based on my research for over two decades, the presence of a Russian separatist movement, as well as pro-Russian sentiments, have been a concern on and off for decades. This author's field notes from 1995 and 1996 contain statements to the effect that Crimea will sooner or later be part of Russia. The Spring 2014 annexation by the Russian Federation is therefore more accurately viewed as the most recent chapter in a much longer story.

## A Contested Past

The current transition in power is fraught with tension in part because it takes place on the foundation of a highly contested past. The main ethnic groups – and here the focus is on Russians and Crimean Tatars – have orthogonal views of history, and consequently incommensurable ways of justifying their action on the peninsula they share. Few people realise the Crimean Tatars once had a thriving khanate or kingdom, called the Crimean Khanate, that extended far beyond the geographic boundaries of present day Crimea. Russians tend to deploy an idiom that legitimatises their presence by arguing the khanate was merely a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, and Crimea voluntarily acceded to become part of Russia, a status that lasted from Empress Catherine II in 1783 until the territory was ceded to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954. Crimean Tatars counter that the khanate was an independent state that was not only tolerant of diversity, but one of the strongest powers in Eastern Europe for some three centuries prior to the forced annexation.

There is a similar difference of perspectives on the period when Nazi forces occupied Crimean territory during the Great Patriotic War. Russians allege the Crimean Tatars committed treason, forming battalions to assist the Germans. While the battalions were real, Crimean Tatars counter by pointing to what the charges elide: all ethnic groups collaborated, and Crimean Tatars also fought valiantly as Soviet soldiers. Mustafa Djemilev, the former chairman of the Crimean Tatar political body, the Mejlis, pointed out that, at the time, Crimean Tatars were caught between two hegemonies, neither of which respected their rightful place on the peninsula (personal communication). Djemilev is a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and a renowned defender of Crimean Tatars' minority rights.

Diametrically opposing views of the past also extend to the Crimean Tatar's 1944 deportation. Russians claim treason calls for capital punishment, and so the deportation that led to the death of an estimated 40% of the population was a 'humane' act that took them to warmer climates, eclipsing the fact they were interned in labour camps. Crimean Tatars see the deportation as genocide and point out that it was the women, children, and elderly that were carried away in cattle cars (not soldiers or combatants), while their husbands, fathers, and sons fought at the front. The people who were deported had not committed any crimes. Today, these deeply traumatic events, for which a unified national narrative is notably still lacking, complicate the transition in power because neither group sees the other very objectively. Russians continue to judge Crimean Tatars on the basis of the Nazi occupation.

It was only after the disintegration of the Soviet Union that the Crimean Tatars were able to repatriate on any significant scale. There had been state-approved programmes to resettle the Crimean Tatars announced in 1989.

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, it was basically left to the Crimean Tatars to self-repatriate. Over 200,000 returned, in spite of challenging economic and political conditions. Local authorities were unprepared to handle this influx. Respecting and not wishing to displace the ordinary Russians and Ukrainians who had been given their property, Crimean Tatars developed a strategy of occupying former state property. Most of the settlements they formed (first called *zakhvat* or captures, and later renamed *polyan protesta* or fields of protest) remain without basic amenities like paved roads, plumbing, water, and gas.

## Crimea as Part of Newly Independent Ukraine

The government of Ukraine made valiant attempts to reintegrate the Crimean Tatars and foster a tolerant society in Crimea. However, deep structural problems prevented success. For example, a law on the restoration of the formerly deported peoples' rights was drafted, but never passed the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada. Crimean Tatars faced continuing obstacles to acquiring land, housing, and property throughout the 1990s. The government of Ukraine also refused to recognise the Mejlis as a legitimate organ of self-governance. While many Crimeans were in principle willing to integrate the formerly deported, Crimean Tatars remained underrepresented in organs of government, law enforcement, and many professions. These factors, combined with poverty, unemployment, and poor access to health and social services led many Crimean Tatars to feel like an underclass. The Slavic population contests this by pointing to Tatar entrepreneurialism and denies discrimination.

While little was accomplished to right the political wrongs, the cultural landscape blossomed. The truth about the deportation that had been silenced under Soviet rule re-emerged as the Crimean Tatars recovered mosques taken by the Soviets, opened a library of their own, and printed books and newspapers that would have been censored by Soviet authorities. They introduced Crimean Tatar as a language of instruction in the schools, and honoured their political and cultural heroes with monuments across the landscape. They began tending to graves of their ancestors, many of which had been desecrated by local Slavs. Crimean Tatars re-mapped the landscape with ancient toponyms erased by the Soviet regime. The central Ukrainian government was, for the most part, a partner in this process: for example, the 1944 deportation was written into Ukrainian history books, Crimean Tatars were elected to the Verkhovna Rada, and under President Kuchma there was a Presidential Council that created a direct channel of communication between Crimean Tatar political body, the Mejlis, and the central government in Kiev.

## Russian Annexation of Crimea

Russia's annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014 has been referred to as one of Europe's greatest crises since the Cold War (Mankoff, 2014). The egregious disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty, followed by the failure of the Budapest Memorandum to protect a denuclearised Ukraine, has left many Crimeans feeling they have been abandoned by the international community and are now alone with their problems. While Ukraine failed to pass a law on rehabilitation when Crimea was part of its territory, Putin was quick to issue a decree to rehabilitate the group in April 2014. Whether it actually benefits the indigenous people is still a question.

What has annexation meant for the Crimean people? Articles in the Russian language press applaud changes like higher pensions, lower public transportation fares, and the very public 'battle' with corruption. Russians who long admired Russia's greater prosperity are now increasingly optimistic about their future. Business people are challenged by the new legal context, but overall, the area is being primed for growth: in October, Medvedev approved a free economic zone for Crimea to attract investors. The Russian government projects spending 15.6 billion dollars on development by 2020.

As in the past, however, barriers that are both structural and psychological remain. President Vladimir Putin assured Crimean Tatars and the international community that Russia will take measures to protect Crimean Tatars and make them feel they are 'full-fledged masters in their own land.' What has transpired since, however, could not be further from that description: forced disappearances, searches, and shrinking freedom of the press and speech have filled people of all ethnic backgrounds with fear and anxiety. An especially troubling development from a human rights perspective is that throughout summer and fall of 2014, searches of homes and schools became routine. Nightly news broadcasts showed personal belongings strewn from homes into courtyards and school libraries being

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searched by armed men. Families were often commanded to lay face down on the floor while possessions were ransacked and electronics taken. Those in possession of newspapers published by organisations banned after the annexation could be labelled 'extremist' and subject to further legal proceedings, regardless of their personal beliefs. The Federal List of Extremist Materials is growing, and there is a new centre for counteracting extremism attached to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

What these experiences and more described below have in common is that they are being justified by local Crimean authorities with reference to law. Thus, rising fear and anxiety emerge not from lawlessness, but the ways in which the current authorities are using the laws of the Russian Federation, in a kind of 'lawfare,' to silence or eliminate potential dissent. Lawfare is used here in the anthropological sense (Comaroffs, 2006), as a means to accomplish the subordination or control of subaltern or less powerful groups. While authorities claim searches are in the interest of residents who will come under the laws of the Russian Federation in January 2015, it is clear to many that these laws are not applied equally to all.

A good example of this unevenness pertains to freedom of religion. Men in black balaclavas and camouflage gear have systematically searched mosques for literature that is banned under the laws of the Russian Federation. They break the law only by arriving unannounced. The manner in which these activities are being carried out is extreme. For example, 30 men in camouflage gear and bulletproof vests entered a mosque in the Yalta region without taking off their footwear, in blatant disrespect for Muslim ways (ATR, 2014). Subsequently, Prime Minister Aksyonov promised to correct this by working with religious leaders in identifying the banned literature (ATR, 2014).

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church faces uncertainty as well: its future depends on whether or not it is allowed to register in Russia. At this time, it is still unclear. The leader of the Ukrainian Church stated pressure from the authorities prompted him to close nearly one third of his congregations, and some of his priests have fled (Birnbaum, 2014). The church appears to be the last bastion of support for those identifying as Ukrainian in Crimea, because Ukrainian language has been eliminated from the school curriculum. Russian Orthodox churches have not been subject to similar searches.

The new legal framework is also being utilised to restrict freedom for the press. Security forces have, without warning, confiscated the computers, equipment, and other property of the major mass media outlet Chornomorsk, changed the staff at Kirim, and closed the Crimean Investigative Journalism Center. They sent a warning letter to the Crimean Tatar station ATR that they were implicitly inciting inter-ethnic hatred. These activities are being carried out in the name of the law: the authorities point out, for example, that all mass media outlets must now register with the authorities, and that the reason masked security forces suddenly confiscated the equipment of Chornomorsk was because of unpaid rent. Aspects of free speech have also become criminalised. In June 2014, the State Duma of Russia approved a bill that imposed prison sentences for spreading extremism on the Internet. The definition of 'extremism' here is broad, and responsibility extends to ordinary Internet users, even for 'liking' another person's post. In Yalta, for example, a resident is now facing a criminal case for his post on a social media site.

All of these changes are being reinforced through the election of cadres loyal to Prime Minister Aksyonov, and the removal of those perceived to be disloyal. The Crimean Tatar executive body, the Mejlis, was evicted, along with its newspaper, Avdet, from their premises. The past leader, Mustafa Djemilev, and current leader, Refat Chubarov, were not permitted to return to their homes on the peninsula and are now in exile in Kiev. They were served papers banning them for four years on the grounds that they were 'inciting ethnic hatred.' A scholar, Nadir Bekirov, was prevented from speaking at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples when men pulled up in an unmarked car, beat him, and took his passport.

Aksyonov's power appears to be expanding. The Autumn 2014 parliamentary elections were marked by complaints that candidates not belonging to Aksyonov's party were not allowed to run because of purported irregularities in the papers they submitted to support their candidacies. As regards the election of the head of the Parliament, Aksyonov's opponents in the election stood up and declared him the "only" alternative. The vote, as in Soviet days, was unanimous. Aksyonov now holds both top leadership positions in Crimea: he heads the executive as Prime Minister, and the legislature as head of the Supreme Council of Crimea (recently renamed State Council). The depth

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and the intensity of the incursions into the lives of ordinary Crimeans should now be clear. Many of these stories have escaped the mainstream international news, but they are important because they help us to understand the everyday realities on the Crimean peninsula today.

## Crimeastan

It is perhaps unremarkable that events in Crimea somewhat resemble Agamben's description of a 'state of exception.' In Agamben's view, a 'state of exception' comes about when law is temporarily suspended, or when the only law that applies is that of the sovereign itself (Agamben, 2005, p.34). Sergey Aksyonov is a paradigmatic example of the sovereign as an exception: after his mercurial rise, he has been uniquely privileged to rule more or less by personal decree. With regard to the searches of homes, schools, and religious establishments, for example, Aksyonov justifies and reframes his activities in the name of law and order as 'protective.' But this defence is also marked by fractures and fault lines. According to some reports, he has suggested the Crimean Tatars be tried for WWII treason or be deported (Rayfield, 2014). A selective interpretation of history, almost melancholic in its confluences of past and present, impairs the ability to treat residents equally.

In this environment, we see discourses of legality – accompanied by a new rhetoric about rights, laws, and constitutions – multiplying. In a counterpoint to Agamben, John and Jean Comaroff (2006) have noted what they call a proliferation of parallel sovereignties that disorder post-colonies. While they base their work in Africa, Crimea, too, exhibits something akin to a spectacle of law. The new constitution, thrown together in a matter of days and filled with a multitude of typological errors, appeared on the Internet one night and then was just as rapidly taken down. Another example is provided by the Crimean Autonomous Republic government website. In what seems almost a parody, the government prides itself in hearing 13 draft laws in one day. As journalist Liliya Budjurova phrased it, 'We live in a time when the law has become a joke. Invoking the law is laughable when it is in the hands of anyone who holds an automatic.' The reference to the law being a 'joke' points to the sense that what is happening is not genuine law and order, but a spectacle.

We can better understand this situation following Wilson (2005) and Rigi (2012), who build on Agamben to explore the simulation and counterfeiting of law and order in the Russian Federation. In Crimea, the continuing use of 'self-defence' battalions with impunity to act as they see fit; the frequent references to Russian law without bothering to name any specific laws; and the rapid, sometimes mysterious, replacement of political cadres certainly point to a multi-layered network of organised chaos. On this confusing stage, the government has carried out a spectacle of law and order without actually protecting the most vulnerable citizens. Organisers of the Parliamentary elections suggested some candidates were marginalized because officials had to extemporize in creating and enforcing election rules: they were learning, implementing, and enforcing Russian Federation laws all at the same time. Thus, amidst charges of unfairness, Crimean authorities assert they did the best they could in a new legal environment.

## Conclusion

A Crimean psychologist described the disorientation, fear, and anxiety accompanying the transition in power well when she likened it to waking up in a different country, without having moved from one's couch. The profound state of liminality and ambiguity described above reveal a time of contingency and uncertainty in which ideas and 'reality' were indeterminate. Thomassen argued that 'the modern world is inherently built of a series of revolutions' (2012, p. 702). They are the ground zero of history, dramatic moments of foundation. What we witnessed in Spring 2014 was a foundational moment for Ukraine and Crimea. However, a new order is solidifying that celebrates the reunion with Russia, even as the rights and the wellbeing of the indigenous people are eclipsed.

While the searches have stopped and life, on the surface, is calm, this is still a troubled region. The disjuncture between the authorities and the population has been well encapsulated by one young informant, who stated: 'Now the smart people keep quiet.' Will the next generation take law to be a joke and remain quiescent? Lawfare may be an inflammatory trope, but it encourages us to think carefully about the ways that both real and symbolic violence are impinging on the social imaginary. Fear and anxiety appear to be altering the ability of ordinary Crimeans to act and react. At the very least, we have an expanding state in which the relentless assault on freedoms has become an

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endemic form of social control. It is wise to mobilise a better response now because lawfare undermines the possibility of civil society in this fragile region. The changes we are witnessing are therefore more than a twist in power politics. The events explored here describe much deeper changes.

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