

Crimea and the Crimean Tatars after Annexation by Russia

MUHAMMED KOÇAK

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- **What do the Crimean Tatars mean for the region?**
 - **Why did Russia take such a dramatic step as annexation, and what does Russia expect from this?**
 - **What is the attitude of the US and the EU against Russia and what can they do from now on?**
 - **Where does Turkey stand on this issue?**
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The Russian President Vladimir Putin took the final step for the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol¹² to the Russian Federation by signing a relevant decree on March 21, 2014. Sevastopol, hosting the Russian fleet in the Black Sea, has a special status in the Crimean Peninsula. Although Russia seems to have settled the Crimean issue with this move, the situation in fact has become quite complex and alarming. The moves of Russia are a preview of major breakages both at regional and global levels. Russia has put a similar scenario into effect in the eastern Ukrainian cities of Donetsk³ and Kharkov⁴, both of which are populated by ethnic Russians. On the other hand, the Crimean Tatars, who have claimed their homeland by showing an exemplary civil resistance for centuries, are now facing a difficult test in the middle of this battle royale.

1. In Crimean Tatar language, called "Akyar".

2. http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_04_11/Crimea-Sevastopol-included-in-list-of-Russian-constituent-entities-in-Constitution-9719/

3. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/04/07/so-is-donetsk-the-next-crimea/>

4. <http://rt.com/news/ukraine-kharkov-rights-donetsk-202/>

THE CRIMEAN TATARS

Although the Crimean Tatars represent 10 percent of the Crimean population, it is impossible in historic and legal aspects to consider this people as an ordinary minority group living in the peninsula. The Crimean Tatars are Turkic Muslims and the indigenous people of Crimea. After World War II, however, the entire Crimean Tatar population faced forceful deportation during the Russian Imperial and Soviet periods, but were allowed to return in the 1980s during the Gorbachev era. The Crimean Tatars managed to reach a fair level of population in their very homeland, the Crimean Peninsula.

After the establishment of a Turko-Islamic civilization by the state of the Golden Horde in the Crimean Peninsula in the 13th century, and particularly after the Golden Horde's downfall in the 16th century, the Crimean Khanate dominated the Black Sea basin and the Kipchak steppes. As the successors of the Crimean Khanate, the Crimean Tatars suffered many wars, genocides and forced deportations. The Russian Empire annexed Crimea nine years after it signed the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Muslims

MUHAMMED KOÇAK

Koçak graduated from the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University in 2013. He attended the Russian Language course at Pushkin Language Institute in Moscow in the summer of 2011 and studied for a year as an undergraduate at Franklin & Marshall College in the US. He is currently pursuing an MA in the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University, and concentrates on political and social transformations in the Former Soviet region and Muslim minorities in Russia. Koçak is fluent in English and Russian.

living in the Crimean Khanate, which had stretched from modern-day Romania to the Caucasus beyond the Crimean Peninsula, were subjected to a great deal of oppression following the annexation. The Crimean War, which took place from 1853 to 1856, was an important turning point for the Crimean Tatars.

In the aftermath of the Crimean War, the Russian Empire increased the pressure on the Crimean Tatars, suspecting them of collaboration with the enemy. As a result of increased state repression, large groups of the Crimean Tatars emigrated to Ottoman territories. Some of them died while trying to cross the Black Sea during the migration yet others who managed to immigrate became miserable in the Ottoman land.⁵ The Crimean Tatars were also accused of collaboration with the enemy in the consecutive Ottoman-Russian wars and in the World Wars. The entire population of Crimean Tatars stuffed in trains and exiled to Siberia and Uzbekistan as of May 18, 1944; the incident is still remembered today by the Crimean Tatars all around the world. These forced relocations to desolate areas with poor material conditions resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths.⁶

After World War II, calling Crimean Tatars a nation was banned in the Soviet Union, and this group was entirely disregarded. During the Nikita Khrushchev period, the Crimean Tatars organized protests countrywide to return home, and some returned. Others who remained in Uzbekistan and Siberia faced further repression. In the meantime, Slavs were continued to be rapidly populated in the Crimean Peninsula. In this period, authors, thinkers and activists from different nations, in addition to Abdulcemil (or Dz-emilev) Kirimoglu who is the former head of Crimean Tatar National Assembly, supported the Crimean Tatars' struggle for freedom and their homeland. Kirimoglu's struggle reinforced the national consciousness among the Crimean Tatars and invigorated the movement for unity of all Muslim Turkic peoples under Is-

mail Bey Gaspıralı (Ismail Gasprinski)'s late 19th century maxim "Unity of language, thought and action." Established by activists in the 1960s, the Crimean Tatar National Movement has given an incredible fight for the survival of the Crimean Tatar consciousness of the nation through underground activities since the 1960s. Even under Gorbachev, who promised reform in the Soviet Union via *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the official policy concerning the Crimean Tatars did not change. Their return to their homeland was obstructed in various ways. The Crimean Tatar National Movement called for all Crimean Tatars to come back home.

Crimea was given to Ukraine (then part of the Soviet Union) in 1954 by the Soviet leader Khrushchev - a Ukrainian himself - and remained within the borders of the newly independent Ukraine following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Crimea was of critical importance to Russia since the ethnic composition of the peninsula changed until then and the Russian ethnic majority living in the peninsula turned more nationalist than those living in the Russian Federation, and because Russia's Black Sea Fleet continued to be deployed in the city of Sevastopol. These two points did not cause any problems during the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma period; however, they became an issue for Russia after the Orange Revolution due to the pro-European Union foreign policy moves of the new Ukrainian government.

A group of Crimean Tatars returned to their homeland after 1990, but the Ukrainian administration was reluctant to grant them social and economic rights. Therefore, their struggle to maintain their national and cultural status continued. Founded under the leadership of Kirimoglu, the Crimean Tatar National Assembly (Mejlis) worked for the return of the Crimean Tatars to Crimea and their involvement in Crimean and Ukrainian politics. As a result, the Crimean Tatars claimed 14 seats in the Crimean Parliament and were represented in the Ukrainian Parliament (Rada). They regarded democracy as the greatest guarantee of their rights, supporting the Orange Revolution in 2004 and Ukraine's membership bid to the

5. Hakan Kırımlı, "Kırım Tatarları Kimdir?", <http://www.kirimdernegi.org.tr/sayfa.asp?id=456>

6. <http://www.iccrimea.org/scholarly/jopohl.html>

European Union (EU). They engaged in the March 2014 protests alongside the democratic forces against the Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich. However, after the Ukrainian Parliament ousted Yanukovich on February 23, 2014, Russia, concerned about its own interests in the region, intervened in Ukraine via Crimea. Paramilitary groups directed by Russia raided the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and had the Russian Unity Party leader Sergei Aksyonov elected as its new prime minister. Acting impatiently, the new administration decided to join Russia in a referendum held on March 16, 2014. The Crimean Tatar Assembly called for a boycott of the referendum, saying that the vote had no legal basis, so it would not recognize the outcome. As a result, most Crimean Tatars boycotted the vote.⁷ On a separate occasion, the Crimean Tatar Assembly decided to seek ethnic and territorial autonomy on March 29, 2014.⁸

As they have done for centuries, the Crimean Tatars sided with the civilian resistance in the latest developments and claimed their rights in the framework of democratic and legal principles. Despite the atrocities and repression that they suffered under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the Crimean Tatars have maintained their national identity and claimed the Crimean Peninsula as their homeland. Today, they are giving a fight under the leadership of Kirimoglu, a personal witness of the persecution, including the 1944 Exile, to which they were subjected in the past. In the current development, the Crimean Tatars come to the forefront as actors who should never be underestimated.

PUTIN AND RUSSIA'S NEW MOVE

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been trying to create a global actor from the Russian Federation since he took office in 2000. Putin made his first critical move with the annexation of Crimea. Russian inter-

vention following the crisis in Ukraine should be taken seriously by keeping in mind that Putin describes the collapse of the Soviets as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century.⁹

Crimea is quite important in geopolitical terms for it is situated in a domineering part of the Black Sea. It is also a part of a Russian project to open the Caspian Sea to the international waters via the Sea of Azov neighboring Crimea. However, Crimea occupies only a small portion of the Russian foreign policy in the Putin period. Putin believes that the way to being a global actor passes through controlling the adjacent countries. So, he secured the control over the autonomous republics inside, and then headed towards the Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the Eastern Europe.

Russia's annexation of Crimea showed that the propaganda mechanism remaining from the Soviet era were still quite effective. At the outset, Russia introduced Crimea as a self-governing republic where ethnic Russians live.¹⁰ As mentioned above, the Crimean Peninsula was populated by Russians in the last century. Since they are not indigeneous, it is out of the question for ethnic Russians to have the right to internal self-determination in the Crimean Peninsula.¹¹ Besides, according to the Ukrainian constitution, not only the secession of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea from Ukraine but also holding a referendum on any subject is unconstitutional.¹²

It is also critical to see that in the referendum the voters were given only two options as either to approve the 1992 Constitution, which grants a wide range of rights to the Autonomous Republic, or to join Russia, but they were denied a third option as to whether their region should enjoy state autonomy within Ukraine. This also points out why the Crimean citizens who

7. <http://www.voanews.com/content/crimean-tatar-leader-expresses-concerns-for-future/1886562.html>

8. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/29/us-ukraine-crisis-crimea-tatars-idUSBREA2S09320140329>

9. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>

10. http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/03/15_a_5951217.shtml

11. <http://www.cfr.org/ukraine/why-crimean-referendum-illegitimate/p32594>

12. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/17/world/europe/ukraine-vote-legality/>

are satisfied with the current status did not vote.¹³ The US, Britain and Russia signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in 1994 pledging to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity on the condition that Ukraine must destroy all nuclear weapons on its territory. This memorandum assigns Russia a role for the protection -obviously not the annexation - of the Ukrainian territorial integrity. In addition, the current situation also put the burden on the US and Britain for the protection of the Ukrainian territory in case of a Russian intervention.¹⁴

The legitimacy of Russia's annexation of Crimea in legal terms seems quite problematic and all these developments raise more concerns considering where Russia positions itself under the Putin administration. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation experienced a problematic integration process with the West and failed to become a determining global actor in the first decade following the Cold War. The status quo formed after the Cold War has created a unipolar international environment dominated by the US. Although the US with its "Russia First" policy supported the "Near Abroad" doctrine¹⁵ of Russia to provide stability in the region, the two countries encountered each other during the "Color Revolutions" of the 2000s in some of the former Soviet republics. As the US overtly supports the winds of change in the regional countries, Russia did not want to lose control over these countries. In this respect, the Russian intervention in Crimea and annexation in a hurry should be evaluated as the most serious step it has taken against the status quo of the post-Cold War period.

To date, Russia had never hesitated to intervene in numerous regions both in the Caucasus and the Central Asia. Similarly, Russia ventured a war in

Chechnya and military interventions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Crimea stands in a very different position. During a telephone conversation, Putin told Kirimoglu that the secession of Ukraine from the Soviet Union was unlawful¹⁶ and this is a sign of possible new interventions in Ukraine after the one in Crimea. Similar incidents that took place in Ukraine's eastern cities of Donetsk and Kharkov¹⁷ recently, in addition to a price increase in natural gas for economic pressure on Ukraine are also a sign of this.¹⁸ Therefore, seeking legitimacy for this intervention or consent with a de facto action may establish a ground for possible interventions in the near future in Astana¹⁹, capital of Kazakhstan, Transdniester²⁰ region of Moldova as well as many other regions we cannot think of.

For these reasons, the annexation of Crimea is quite alarming in terms of the republics in the Central Asia and South Caucasus. Aggressive and decisive foreign policy of Putin who sees the collapse of the Soviets as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century and wishes to bring the former Soviet states under the Eurasia economic union will prompt other former Soviet countries such as Turkmenistan, which adopts impartiality as a principle in foreign policy, Kazakhstan and Georgia, both of which follow a multifaceted pragmatic foreign policy like Ukraine, to make a choice. The attitude of the West in the Crimean crisis is quite critical in this regard. The reason is that it is much likely for countries such as Kazakhstan, Moldova and Georgia to sit around the table with Russia if they feel threatened. Therefore, if these countries are not given a guarantee in the face of the occupation of Crimea and possible new interventions afterwards, the world may face "a new" Cold War.

13. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/6/crimean-parliament-movestosecede.html>

14. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ukraine._Memorandum_on_Security_Assurances

15. http://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205189938.pdf

16. <http://www.trt.net.tr/trtavaz/kirimoglu-putin-le-kirim-i-konustu-haber-detay,tr,120880.aspx>

17. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dfaf4d0-c0bc-11e3-a74d-001444feabdc0.html#axzz2yVmW0TS2>

18. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-26902522>

19. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68218>

20. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/transnistria-europe-other-crimea-2014313132814552215.html>

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

While Russia takes a step against the international law and regional and global dynamics to create alarming consequences with the annexation of Crimea, it is difficult to say that the US and the EU take a step to reverse the process. Millions showing their support for the country's integration with Europe by pouring into streets after Ukraine signed the Partnership Agreement with the EU a few months ago are highly disappointed with the EU's failure to develop a clear attitude to stop Russia. The US reactions on the Crimean issue do not go beyond words. However, it is possible to say that Turkey makes necessary diplomatic efforts although falls short to create a public opinion on the subject matter.

The EU's energy dependency on Russia and deep trade relations between the EU countries and Russia are the most important factors preventing the EU from taking a clear-cut stance against Russia. As a result, the EU was able to reach only the second phase in the three-step sanction process²¹ that they announced. Accordingly, the third step has not been taken in which sanctions against Russia are required due to the annexation of Crimea, but the accounts of some individuals who play a role in the annexation process in the European banks are frozen. It is an issue of concern how the EU will respond to the decisions taken in Donetsk and Kharkov.²² The EU had previously announced that the third step in the sanctions progression would go ahead if Russia invades eastern Ukraine.

Different attitudes adopted by different actors in the EU, depending on the level of mutual relations with Russia, and the unanimity requirement in the EU-related decisions have played an effective role in the implementation of this policy. Countries that do not have friendly relations with Russia historically, such as Poland, take a more hawkish stance regarding sanctions against Russia as others, such as Germany and the Netherlands, walk on eggshells. As a matter

of course, the multi-voiced structure in the European block remains inadequate to deter Russia under Putin's rule.

NOT TO LEAVE CRIMEAN TATARS ALONE

As the Russian seizure in the Crimean Peninsula continues, the Crimean Tatars straddled the fence. The Crimean Tatars faced many social and political issues even under the Ukrainian administration. It may be said that they are likely to encounter bigger problems from now on. For instance, the Crimean Parliament promised seats for the Crimean Tatars before the invasion of Russia, but broke its word after the invasion. The integration of the Crimean institutions to Russia continues. In the days to come, Russia's more security-wise and sporadically Islamophobic approaches, compared to that of Ukraine, against Muslim peoples under its domination may increase the pressure on the Crimean Tatars. Difficult days await the Crimean Tatars who were relatively able to live their social, religious and cultural lives as Crimean Tatars under the Ukrainian rule.

As Russia becomes a power center in the region and Ukraine strives for integration with the EU, the Crimean Tatar National Assembly giving a fight to protect the rights of the indigenous people has to deal with Russia rather than Ukraine from now on. The Assembly has taken a stand against unlawfulness and the efforts fait accompli. This is quite critical for their stance. However, it is a matter of discussion, how long they will resist the Russia's process of the Crimean integration. Russia has begun to distribute Russian identity cards in Crimea and this is yet another problem. If the Crimean Tatars apply for Russian identification cards, then it means they accept the invasion; otherwise, the Crimean Tatars will suddenly be foreigners in their homeland.²³

The US and the EU must not overlook Russia's moves threatening the international law and region-

21. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-eu-russia-ukraine-sanctions-idUSBREA251WI20140306>

22. <http://euobserver.com/foreign/123559>

23. <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/crimean-tatars-despite-call-for-autonomy-face-dilemma-in-relations-with-russia-cooperate-or-boycott-341552.html>

al and global balances, and should engage in efforts to step into the situation. Russia will most probably annex a few more regions in the east of Ukraine after Crimea, bring this to the negotiation table, and bargain with the West against the sanctions applied so far.

In this process, Turkey has failed to create a public opinion in Crimea, the society that Turkey is supposed to concentrate on. Turkey had provided a great deal of moral and material support to Egyptians who resist the coup in Egypt and to Syrians who fight against

Bashar al Asad in Syria. If Turkey manages to create the very same perception for Crimea and provides moral and material support to the Crimean Tatars, about 250,000 Turkic people living in the Crimean Peninsula, this may cause dramatic changes in the region in the long run. Turkey's efforts must go beyond the Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey.

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