

Crimean Passions Around EuroMaidan: An Active Pro-European Minority of Crimeans Against the Autonomous Republic's Pro-Eurasian Authorities and an Ambivalent Majority

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21 January 2014

It is obvious: Euromaidan has already become a phenomenon of Ukraine's social and political life, even regardless of the fact that formally it has achieved none of its publicly proclaimed goals - such as signing an association agreement with the EU, bringing to justice those responsible for the violent dispersal of student protesters on November 30th, and a radical re-formatting of Ukrainian government on both institutional and individual levels. Moreover, Euromaidan has notably changed the socio-political climate in the country and is instrumental in creating a positive image of the Ukrainian people abroad. One thing that makes Euromaidan different from its predecessors - "the granite revolution", "Rise up, Ukraine!" campaign, the Tax Maidan and even the Orange revolution - is its sheer scale. A Euromaidan rally in December 2013 (the so-called Veche) saw a record number of protesters in Ukrainian history. According to Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, it was also the largest pro-European demonstration in Europe. One may add that this protest is also likely to last longer than the Orange Maidan.

The main difference, however, lies in Euromaidan's new quality as compared to previous Ukrainian protest campaigns. In 2004 Orange revolution supporters pledged their hope for a better life in the country with Viktor Yushchenko, a candidate in the presidential election, making his name the most popular slogan in Maidan: "Yushchenko!". But when the elected president failed in his actions and excelled in his inability to act, a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm was replaced by a sense of profound disillusionment and political apathy on the part of orange revolution activists

and supporters. Some politicians and analysts even believed that this experience made the Ukrainian society immune to future mass-scale protest actions. Such analyses, however, proved completely wrong. Deepening economic problems and, specifically, the risk of a default, together with a curb on civil rights and restrictions of the freedom of expression, led to an escalation in the protest potential. The government's decision on 21 November 2013 to suspend the preparations for an association agreement with the EU detonated a bomb of public unrest manifesting many Ukrainians' dissatisfaction with the state of the country and their support for Euro-integration. A new powerful impulse to the momentum of the protests was given by the violent crackdown of the anti-riot police "Berkut" on Euromaidan student protesters. For most Ukrainians it served as a turning point in their struggle for Euro-integration, which became a fight for their constitutionally guaranteed rights of personal security and peaceful assemblies.

Crucially, before the November events Ukrainian society had actually reached a consensus on the importance of Euro-integration. A characteristic detail is how even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate voiced its support for Euro-integration together with other churches. The government's suspension of the signing of the Association agreement with the EU was perceived by many Ukrainians as a threat of a reversal in its foreign policy direction. Furthermore, the events at the Vilnius summit produced in the society a psychological feeling of the loss of the European perspective, which could transform Ukraine into a normal European country and ensure for everyone a decent and

dignified life. For a large part of Ukrainians, the perspective of an EU integration embodied their hope in overcoming the most acute Ukrainian problems, such as corruption, poverty, dysfunctional state structures, and establishing new standards in social, economic and political life.

As a result, there emerged a qualitatively new form of public protest - Euromaidan. Its principal difference from the Orange maidan is that opposition politicians today are not regarded as unconditional leaders and organisers of the masses. Civil society tends to act on par with the political opposition and - with limited success - to form the opposition on its own. According to public opinion polls, the absolute majority of Euromaidan supporters joined the protests in Kiev not in response to the opposition's calls. What was an unconditional loyalty to the opposition's presidential candidate in 2004 transformed ten years later, on Euromaidan 2014, into the civil society's ambition to turn politicians into instruments of positive changes in the country. Characteristically, the first rally to take place was the students' Euromaidan, followed by the Euromaidan of the political opposition in Kiev's European Square. Later these two movements merged on Independence Square. The merger, however, is not absolute. In spite of the opposition-initiated creation at the end of December of the All-Ukrainian Union "Maidan", consisting of politicians and civil society representatives, Kiev's Euromaidan includes more than twenty various civil groups and unions outside the opposition's control. In fact, it is possible to speak of the ongoing effort of Euromaidan participants to establish between different civil society structures a symbiotic network model of relations and self-organisation, against the attempts of the political opposition to build and lead a verti-

cally constructed movement. Ukrainian 2014 "Euro-revolution" has demonstrated its civil society's coming of age and maturity; many segments of civil society and their ideas appear more productive for the country than the actions and ideas of the pro-government or even the opposition politicians. It is obvious, however, that Euromaidan's heterogeneous civil society sector is too short of time to propose its own independent political project in the nearest future. Its activists mostly realise this and accept the need to work with existing politicians to achieve socially important goals. This is clearly a difficult task, requiring mutual commitment from the civil society sector and the political establishment alike.

But - as it has been already stated - Kiev's Euromaidan is a phenomenon of national importance. And not only because among its activists there are representatives from all the country's regions, including the Crimea and Sevastopol. (Significantly, Independence Square in November-December featured the flags of the Crimean Autonomous Republic and the Crimean Tatars, while the hungry protesters for many days on end could treat themselves to Crimean plov and other dishes of the Crimean Tatar cooks). Euromaidan also has its counterparts, its supporters and opponents in Ukrainian regions.

EUROMAIDAN IN THE CRIMEA: AN ACTIVE MINORITY

Euromaidans beyond Kiev sprang up in November-December 2013 in practically all regional centres and in many smaller towns. They are, however, of different formats. A permanent Euromaidan in city centre, with a stage, exists only in Lviv; in some cities there are tent camps, while in others only regular activists' meetings take place. The appearance

of a Euromaidan in the Crimea is an expected surprise. The Crimean peninsula consists of two territorial administrative units - the Crimean Autonomous Republic and Sevastopol. Both regions are traditional Party of Regions (PR) and Viktor Yanukovich's electoral constituencies. Only Donetsk and Lugansk regions show a higher than in the Crimea level of electoral support for the pro-presidential forces. Thus, for instance, in a 2012 parliamentary election, in spite of a low turn-out, the Party of Regions received 52,3% and 46,9% of votes in the Autonomous Republic and Sevastopol respectively; in the second round of the presidential election Yanukovich got 78% of the Republic's votes. Party of Regions members enjoy a full control of the executive and legislative branches of power in the Republic; the Party of Regions' outfit in the Autonomous Republic "The Regions of Crimea" holds 82 out of 100 seats in the local parliament. The Party of Regions also controls the absolute majority of local administrations in the region, as well as governmental and local administrative bodies in Sevastopol.

It did seem that under such circumstances there was no space for the pro-EU sentiment in the Crimea. The region, however, is by many tokens the most peculiar part of Ukraine; and the Crimean community is a multifaceted society. The Autonomous Republic and Sevastopol are the only regions in the country where ethnic Ukrainians are not the biggest ethnic group, the majority of population comprised by representatives of ethnic minorities. Crimea is also an area, compactly inhabited by the Crimean Tatar people. According to the 2001 Ukrainian census, the population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea consisted of the following ethnic groups: 58,8 % - Russians, 24,6 % Ukrainians, and over slightly 12 % - Crimean Tatars. In Sevastopol, the relative

number of ethnic Russians is higher than the general Crimean indicators.

Crimea's ethnic composition explains its widespread pro-Russian sentiment, which in some residents of the Autonomous Republic and Sevastopol has taken the form of Europhobia. However, there is also a significant number of Crimeans who hold opposing views or support Ukraine's integration into Europe and the Eurasian Union at the same time. Thus, already in late November 2013 Crimea saw public pro-EU protests in such towns as Yevpatoria, Feodosia, Dzhankoy, and Yalta. Later similar relatively sporadic actions took place in Kerch. Most systematic actions happened in Sevastopol and the capital of the Autonomous Republic Simferopol.

From late November to early January the residents of Simferopol witnessed almost daily events organised by Euro-activists. On weekdays those were activities of a few dozens of activists on the square outside the Republic's government building. And on weekends a column of a few hundreds of people moved from the square to the Crimea's parliament or the Representation of the President of Ukraine in the Republic of Crimea. A number of auto-caravans in support of Euromaidan drove along Crimean roads. Money, food, medicines and clothes were collected for the protesters in Kiev. First protests in the Crimea took place under the slogans in support of the president's commitment to Euro-integration and with the demand to sign the Association agreement in Vilnius. But after the events on November 29th and 30th, the views of Crimean Euro-activists became more radical - they rallied with the demands to name and bring to justice those responsible for the brutal crackdown on Maidan students, and called on the government and - later - the president to resign.

As for Crimean printed and electronic

mass media, most of which are owned by the Party of Regions members or the state, in their representation of the events in Kiev they largely belied the standards of objective journalism. Many of them contributed to the anti-Maidan propaganda campaign. Some of the newspapers regularly presented the average Crimean reader with stories on the "Nazi coup" in Kiev, "Maidowns" (a nasty blend of the words "Maidan" and "Down"), and depicting Euromaidan activists as hired stooges or loafers. This media propaganda campaign made Euromaidan supporters in Simferopol resort to such means of self-organisation as personal connections and Facebook networks. At the end of November they elected coordinators of the "Euromaidan-Crimea" movement, including Serhii Kovalskiy, an activist of the Crimean section of *Batkivshchyna*, Serhii Mokrenyuk, head of the Crimean section of the non-parliamentary opposition party "Democratic Alliance", an Udar activist Ismail Ismailov and leader of the "Crimean centre for business and cultural co-operation "Ukrainian House" Andriy Shchekun. Although three of the four coordinators are party activists, they were not delegated to the movement "Euromaidan-Crimea" by their respective parties. Moreover, in the words of Shchekun, the leaders of Crimean sections of parliamentary parties were primarily concerned with sending Crimean volunteers to Kiev, rather than organising protest actions in the Republic. Shchekun, however, managed to convince young party and civil activists of the need to break through the information blockade and "show Ukraine and the world that there are people in the Crimea who want to live in a European society". He is certain that they succeeded in achieving this goal.

According to Shchekun, Crimean Euro-activists experienced a lot of administrative

pressure and open provocations. Thus, for example, the authorities in Simferopol would deliberately stage mass counter-rallies at the same time and places with the Euromaidan events. They gathered employees of state enterprises to take part in the rallies and deployed powerful sound equipment to silence the opponents. On December 12th 2013, car tires of the leader of "Udar" youth organisation in Sevastopol were slashed and the words "For Maidan" sprayed on the car. A similar incident took place in Simferopol on December 21st 2013: a "Euromaidan-Crimea" coordinator Kovalskiy had his Mercedes damaged by unknown people, prompting a criminal investigation by the police. On December 3rd 2013, attackers set on fire the only Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate in Yevpatoria, whose deacon father Yaroslav Hontar had earlier left with a group of parishioners for Euromaidan in Kiev. Crimean activists continue to report of other provocations and threats to them and their families.

In view of such situation, it may be argued that regardless of its composition of civil society and political parties activists, the movement "Euromaidan-Crimea" is typologically similar to Euromaidan's civil sector in Kiev. On December 4th the Headquarters of national resistance in Crimea was formed, comprising representatives of eight political parties, 14 civil organisations and 11 activists of the "Euromaidan-Crimea" movement. Shchekun and Kovalskiy became coordinators of the Headquarters' Council. In late December 2013 a former head of the Republican Forestry Committee Anatolii Kovalskiy chaired the newly formed organisational committee of the All-Ukrainian Council "Maidan" in Simferopol. Anatolii Kovalskiy became famous in 2004 when he refused to sign a permission to grant large plots of land from Crimea's na-

tional reserves fund to businesses, controlled by M. Kurochkin, a Russian businessman and facilitator between the Ukrainian and Russian governments during the 2004 presidential election.

Presently, there are no readily available sociological data on general population support levels for Euro-integration in the Crimea. However, a poll conducted in December by the Crimean organisation of young political scientists in Simferopol revealed that out of the 400 respondents aged 18-35 60,5% supported the government's decision to suspend the Euro-integration process, 24% were against it, while 15% remained undecided. In case of a referendum, 36% of young people (Ukrainian law defines people under 35 years old as "young") would vote for joining the Customs Union, and 33% - the EU. In other words, the number of young Simferopol residents who support the European or Eurasian vector of integration is relatively the same (the difference lies within the margin of statistical error). It is quite an optimistic result for the pro-EU supporters, considering such factors as ethnic composition in the Republic and the hostile media environment. It is worth noting, however, that the level of pro-EU support is likely to drop among the Crimean residents of older generations.

Generally speaking, a sociological portrait of Crimean EU supporters resembles that of the whole Ukraine: although present in all social and age groups, they are predominantly young, running their own business and Ukrainian-speaking. At least, those are the categories of citizens that take the most active part in the "Euromaidan-Crimea" events, together with political leaders and - to a lesser degree - teachers, journalists, state employees and pensioners. On the other hand, a significant presence of Crimean Tatars among the supporters of local Euromaid-

ans can be seen as their distinctive feature.

CRIMEAN TATARS CHOOSE EUROPE

The population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea includes 270 thousand Crimean Tatars, or roughly 13% of general population. Despite the apparently low population numbers of Crimean Tatars, their national movement has played an important role in the Crimean and Ukrainian politics. This has become possible thanks to the national experience of self-organisation acquired during the long years of deportation and resistance against the communist regime, as well as the formation of national government institutions, such as the general congress Kurultay or a system of executive bodies - Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people and local Mejlis bodies. One of the strong points of the national movement is its extensive network of international links with Muslim and Turkic structures and western donor organisations that provide support to repatriated Crimean Tatars.

In the past few years there has been a notable decline in support for local government and the Mejlis among the Crimean Tatars. This is evident from the increased public activities of the Mejlis political opponents and a growing approval among some segments of the Crimean Muslims of the idea of the creation of a worldwide caliphate as opposed to the idea of upholding the Crimean Tatar national interests. In practice, however, the present Kurultay-Mejlis system remains the most popular and influential in the Crimean Tatar community. The level of public influence exerted by all Crimean Tatar opponents of the current system taken together is nowhere near the capacity and leverage possibilities of the national government bodies. Moreover, last year a two-tier election system to the Kurul-

tay was changed for direct elections, which increased the number of young delegates and made a positive consolidating impact on the Crimean Tatar national movement.

The Mejlis was among the first to announce its support for Euromaidan in Kiev and a European civilisational choice for Ukraine. In December the most influential Crimean Tatar politician Mustafa Dzhemilev, a Soviet-time dissident and a BYuT MP, who for twenty-two years was head of the Mejlis, spoke in front of the pro-EU demonstrators in Kiev. The recently elected new head of the Mejlis, Refat Chubarov, joined the All-Ukrainian Union "Maidan" Council. Head of the International Section at the Mejlis Ali Khamzin remarks that even those political and religious structures of the Crimean Tatars that oppose the national government refrain from running a public campaign against the Euromaidan. They include the non-governmental organisation "Milliy Firqa", the Council of Representatives of the Crimean Tatar People under the President of Ukraine and the presently illegal in Ukraine radical Muslim organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The Mejlis' choice in favour of Euro-integration - which probably reflects the general public mood among the Crimean Tatars - can be explained by the ambition to pursue the nation's strategic and tactical interests. The EU, from a Crimean Tatar perspective, not only guarantees the general democratic development of Ukraine, but also ensures a fairly high level of protection for national minorities and indigenous peoples. Since the election of Yanukovich as president in 2010 this has become an important item on the agenda of the Crimean Tatar leaders, since both central and regional government bodies have been gradually limiting the scope of co-operation and dialogue with the national Crimean Tatar

institutions. The Composition of the Council of Representatives of the Crimean Tatar People under the President of Ukraine, created under Leonid Kuchma as a step to legalise the Mejlis, has been changed to include other Crimean Tatar figures. In the past few years, this was not an actively-functioning body. Local administrations in the Crimean regions, presided by Donbass-born Party of Regions members, have been gradually trying to oust Mejlis representatives from power and replace them with more pro-government oriented Crimean Tatars. The "Kurultay-Rukh" fraction has lost its right to appoint head of the Republican Committee for Interethnic Relations and Deported Citizens at the Crimean Council of Ministers. The Mejlis leaders complain about the disruption of the government's Resettlement and Reintegration programme which last year received the record low 10 million hryvnia from the national budget, in spite of the officially allocated 200 million. Ali Khamzin notes that the state has been unable so far to establish a systematic legal basis to ensure the rights protection and rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar people.

There is, however, a certain number of Crimean Tatars who politically support the Party of Regions and took part in Kiev's Anti-maidan. They are mostly members of "Sebat", a non-governmental organisation that unites participants in the land-grabbing movement. "Sebat"'s representatives state that around 800 of its members joined the Antimaidan in Kiev. A Mejlis leader Khamzin believes that the number was no more than 20-30.

THE EURASIAN CHOICE OF THE AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC'S LEADERSHIP AND THE RUSSIAN FACTOR

Since the beginning of the Euromaidan

protest movement, the Crimean authorities have taken a radically negative position. It did not come as a surprise when on November 27th 2013 the majority of MPs in the Crimean parliament voted in favour of the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of an association agreement with the EU in the name of the national security interests, and condemned the "destructive actions" of "Svoboda", "Batkivshchyna" and "Udar" parties. In an appeal to the president, approved by the extraordinary parliamentary session on December 2nd 2013, Crimean MPs not only harshly criticised their political opponents but also called on the central government to take radical measures. The style of the document is evident from a characteristic quote (originally in Russian): "the government is obliged to prevent an unconstitutional revanche on the part of the bankrupt political forces that profess radical nationalism and have already crossed the line separating it from Nazism". It is of interest to note that the document goes as far as actually labelling the government's opponents as "nazis". More crucially, however, the Crimean parliament calls on the president to "stop the spread of lawlessness and anarchy on the capital's street", to urgently put an end to the activities of the destructive forces including by introduction - if necessary - of the emergency state. The same parliamentary session heard the parliament's vice-speaker Hryhoriy Ioffe declare cynically: "for the events on Maidan in Kiev, for everything that took place there on November 29th and 30th and is going on now, those who organise such "maidans" should be held responsible". As such, he actually justified the excessive use of force against peaceful protesters by anti-riot police.

Another landmark decision of the Crimean parliament came on December 3rd 2013,

when it approved a proposal to the president and government of Ukraine to "consider in the short term the possibility of Ukraine's joining the Customs Union". In other words, Crimean Party of Regions members proposed to their senior party cronies in governmental chairs to officially change the country's foreign policy. For Ukraine's commitment to Euro-integration has been enshrined in laws and its leaders continue to declare that the EU-association process has been only suspended.

It is clear that a difficult economic situation in the country and the political crisis have caused the Autonomous Republic's establishment to fear for its future, advocating the use of force and unleashing a media war against Euromaidan supporters. Furthermore, central authorities could use their Crimean allies' position as an instrument in the general political balance of power in the country. At the same time, the Crimean leadership's decisions and proposals, as well as those in some other regions of South Eastern Ukraine, can be also seen as a symmetrical response to measures in support of the Euromaidan movement, declared and adopted by local government bodies in Western Ukraine.

Until mid-December the pro-government authorities in the Crimea sought to mobilise the population in support of the central government by unleashing a full-fledged media war. Some of the propaganda content was borderline - to say the least - in the context of Crimea's multiethnic community and with regard to Ukraine's national interests. The most controversial came from the Presidium of the Crimean parliament who on December 12th 2013 published an appeal to the people of Crimea. The document described the threat to the Republic's autonomous status from the "organisers of mass street protests in Kiev" and warned that the Crimeans would be "de-

prived of their right to speak, write or be educated in Russian, the native language for the majority of Crimean residents". The appeal also declared that the "Autonomous Republic is in danger!"; "the fate of the whole Ukraine and the Crimean Autonomous Republic is being decided today" and that the "Crimea is facing a choice: to put up with the forced Maidanisation, or to stand up decisively against the anti-government and anti-Crimean forces".

It is hardly necessary to argue here that Kiev's Euromaidan did not voice a single demand to cancel Crimea's autonomous status or to ban the use of the Russian language in the peninsula. Those are not programmatic items for the majority of Euromaidan groups (with the only exception of Svoboda's position on the autonomous status which was not in any case raised during the Euromaidan events). Moreover, if anything the EU integration ensures additional guarantees for the protection of linguistic and cultural rights of national minorities. What was the motive then behind the Crimean parliament leadership's deliberate demonisation of Euromaidan?

Some commentators have suggested that this was more than a simple manifestation of low political culture or a method used to consolidate the pro-government forces in the Crimea in a complex economic and political situation. A more sinister implication was perceived in similar public messages: "Nobody in Kiev should wrongly assume that the Crimea will tolerate the enforcement of some else's will"; as well as in the initiative of the PR deputy in Sevastopol Serhiy Smol'ianinov to collect signatures under an appeal to the Russian president to deploy Russian troops in Ukraine to "counterbalance the army of the United States of America and their NATO aggressors". There has been a steady increase in the number of articles in local printed media on

the breakup of Ukraine, the collapse of Ukrainian statehood, and the need for a federal arrangement, accompanied - sometimes - by not so subtle separatist slogans.

Opposition politicians began to voice their concern over the threat of the Crimean separatism and the Russian factor. An ex-member of the Ukrainian parliament and the Mejlis head Chubarov remarked last December that for him the threat of the Crimea's secession had never been more tangible. On December 14th 2013, a Svoboda MP and a member of the parliamentary committee on the national security and defence Yuriy Syrotyuk reported on the plans for a Russian-backed special operation to declare the Crimea's state sovereignty from Ukraine. According to Syrotyuk, a meeting between PR members of the Crimean parliament, leader of the party "Russian bloc" and representatives of the party "Russian unity" had taken place in the Russian consulate in Simferopol. Allegedly, the secessionist scenario was supposed to be launched publicly with a demand from the Crimean Antimaidan supporters for a referendum on the Crimea's state sovereignty. "This scenario is a contingency plan in that case if Yanukovych loses control in Kiev and the majority in Verkhovna Rada" - said the MP.

Politicians from the above-named pro-Russian parties do not confirm the existence of separatist plans. More in general, it is very difficult to make a proper assessment of Russia's Crimean intentions and Ukrainian action plans, which largely remain hidden from the public eye. It is obvious, however, that Russia closely watches the situation in the Crimea, hoping to use it as a leverage of influence in Ukraine as a whole. The separatist card can be only played in the exceptional circumstances. Even more so after the signing by the Russian and Ukrainian presidents on December

17th 2013 of a deal concerned with a money credit and gas-price reduction, which greatly reduced the risk of any possible separatist scenario in the Crimea by the external forces. Besides, the agreement has resulted in a relative stabilisation of the presidential power and the economic situation in the country which is likely to ease the Crimean political establishment's fears of what they see as the realisation of the worst-case scenario.

And yet, the ongoing political crisis urges the pro-government forces in the Crimea to keep the political situation under control and consolidate the population's support. One of the methods they continue to use is the deliberate escalation of artificial threats. Thus, during a press conference in Simferopol after their return from the pro-government Antimaidan rallies in Kiev, the activists of the Crimean Tatar organisation "Sebat" declared that somewhere in the first half of 2014 the USA intended to use the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people as a platform for provocations in the Republic. Since the anti-Tatar sentiment remains a lingering factor among some segments of the post-Soviet Crimean society, even a hypothetical threat of provocations may push a certain part of Crimeans to show greater support for the authorities as the only stabilising force. Mejlis' head of the international section Khamzin characterises the "Sebat" claims as untruthful and immoral. In his opinion, it is a long-shot attempt to create in the Crimean society a negative image of the future activities in support of the Crimean Tatars' rights, envisaged by the national government bodies as part of the commemorations for the 70th anniversary of Stalin's criminal deportation of the Crimean Tatar people from the Crimea.

WHAT NEXT? A NO-REPLY QUESTION

It is too early to make any conclusions about Euromaidan's results. It is obvious, on the one hand, that Ukraine's authorities managed to steer through a dangerous geo-political curve and even to achieve a relative social and economic stabilisation in the country. On the other, the Euromaidan movement in Kiev and other regions has received a worldwide moral support and continues to exist, albeit without the real resources for a radical change of the political situation. The best-case scenario for the development of the situation in the country would require reaching a set of compromises between the government, the opposition and the society aimed at reforming the country and implementing the Euro-integration policy. This looks like a daunting task, but is not impossible. As for the Crimean Euromaidan supporters, their fate and the situation in the Crimea in general will depend on future developments in the country and on geo-political games around Ukraine....

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