

ХЕНДРИК ВЕБЕР (HENDRIK WEBER) – депутат земельного парламента коммуны Алвер, предприниматель. Возглавляя, созданную в 2017 году в Норвегии общественную организацию «Народная дипломатия – Норвегия», Вебер неоднократно посещал Крым и Донбасс. Из впечатлений от поездок родилась идея написать книгу, которая впервые была опубликована на немецком языке в 2019 году. «Я давно думал, что обязательно напишу книгу обо всех событиях, связанных с Крымом, о моем опыте поездок на полуостров и в Донбасс. Почему-то считал, что сделаю это намного позже: когда выйду на пенсию, например. Но когда я говорю с людьми в Норвегии и Германии, или в других странах Европы, я вижу, что у них в голове полная каша по поводу событий в Крыму и на Донбассе. Они все путают и ничего толком не понимают. Поэтому я решил написать книгу именно сейчас и восстановить хронологию драматических событий, которые привели к воссоединению Крыма с Россией, прежде всего – для европейской аудитории. Возможно, и русской аудитории будет интересно узнать, что думает иностранец об их стране», – так считает сам автор. Теперь читатели могут ознакомиться с книгой Хендрика Вебера, большого друга России и Крыма, изданной на русском языке в России.



Hendrik Weber **OUR CRIMEA**

Hendrik Weber



OURCRIMEA

ISBN 978-5-906097-74-3



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Государственное агентство
управления
идеологической и культурной сферой
Республики Крым

Hendrik Weber

Our Crimea

Moscow, 2021

UDC 323/324(470+571)
LBC 66.3(2Poc)
W 26

Hendrik Weber
W 26 Our Crimea. – Simferopol: N.Orianda, 2021. – 252 с. ил.
ISBN 978-5-888888-8-8

HENDRIK WEBER is a member of the parliament of the municipality of Alver, Norway, and an entrepreneur. As the leader of the Norwegian NGO “People’s Diplomacy — Norway,” founded in 2017, Hendrik Weber visited Crimea and Donbass on several occasions. The impressions of those travels gave rise to an idea of a book, which was originally published in German in 2019, titled “Our Crimea: A Sate Coup or a Democratic Solution?”

Hendrik Weber in his book explores the reasons behind Crimea accession to Russia and described dynamics of the Crimean Peninsula’s development over the past years. Several chapters cover the tumultuous events in Donbass where the Norwegian social activist had been on a humanitarian mission. The book became Europe’s first publication to offer an unbiased and well-reasoned point of view on the Crimean events. Then came the Russian translation tailored to a Russian audience.

The Russian edition of Hendrik Weber’s book is a symbolic endeavor and emphasizes the tendency towards reconciliation of Russia and Western countries based on activities of the broad array of political and non-governmental organizations as well as people’s diplomacy representatives advocating the resumption of a constructive dialogue with Moscow, including the Crimean issue.

UDC 323/324(470+571)
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ISBN 978-5-888888-8-8

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FOREWORD

Anti-Russian sanctions: Europe's dangerous and dead-end course

Let me begin by thanking the author of this book, Hendrik Weber, for the opportunity to inform those in the West who are interested in truthful information about Russia, including Crimea, and who want to know our stance on such a controversial issue as sanctions, which are destroying the fragile and imbalanced world.

In this regard, I would like to focus on three main points.

The first aspect relates to the economic ramifications of the illegitimate sanctions policy upheld by Western countries. We call it illegitimate because it can only be legal if adopted by the UN Security Council. The absurdity of this policy with regard to Russia, which, on top of having a robust and stable economy, serves as Europe's resource base, is obvious. It looks as if someone locked the doors to their own storage room stocked with everyday essentials, depriving themselves of what they need daily. And this looks absurd.

We estimate the damage to Europe's economy to be four times higher than that caused to the Russian economy (damage to Russia: \$50 billion, EU: over \$200 billion). Notably, the Russian countermeasures were nominal and hit the agricultural sector only. Under these conditions, Western sanctions have sparked rapid development of our own agricultural industry.

In addition, the sanctions policy is destroying the world economy and violating the principles of the World Trade Organization.

Secondly, politics-wise, sanctions destabilize international relations and ultimately land us all in a gridlock. They can bring about confrontation between the states involved and stir up a real conflict.

At any rate, historically, the policy of economic strangulation has led to multiple wars and caused massive destruction. Is that what we really want? Of course not! That is why we call this it a dead-end.

The third aspect concerns humanitarian issues. The sanctions policy has an effect on the standard of living of our nations. The practical ramifications of this policy are high unemployment rates, heightened social tensions, and a decline in real income.

A vivid example of this inhumane policy are the sanctions against Syria, fighting international terrorism, and against Venezuela, fighting for its sovereignty and against the meddling in national affairs.

As for our country, the masterminds behind the sanctions forget about Russia's vitality and self-sufficiency as it has all kinds of natural resources and production capabilities. Our endurance and resilience are much higher than Europe's. It is a well-known fact that we have real historical experience and have been accustomed to living under sanctions.

As for Crimea, where, according to Western statements, Russia "occupied" the Russians (sounds weird, doesn't it?), it has to be said that the EU pursues the policy of total blockade of this Russian republic. This is their idea of punishing the Crimean population for the "wrong" votes (97% of the population said "yes") in the legitimate 2014 referendum on accession to Russia,

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even though the referendum is the most democratic way to express the people's will, fully consistent with the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Ukrainian Constitution (Article 138.2).

But the ones behind this policy must realize the futility of trying to block one of the regions of such a powerful state as Russia. The rapid development of Crimea post-2014 against all odds and in the face of sanctions clearly demonstrates this.

Due to the transport blockade of Crimea, Russia built road and rail bridges to Crimea, as well as a state-of-the-art international airport in Simferopol. In response to Ukrainian nationalists that demolished the power lines that supplied 80% of the electricity (it happened in winter), Russia immediately shipped hundreds of electric generators to the peninsula and soon connected a power bridge from the nearest region of Russia to Crimea. And within two years, two large power plants were commissioned in Crimea.

In short, the list of examples illustrating the futility of the anti-Crimean sanctions goes on and on.

The result was a 50-percent increase in the gross regional product in our republic over the past four years, as well as the rapidly growing travel flow, bringing significant income to the Crimean budget.

All of the above shows that the sanctions regime as a whole is not just useless but detrimental to all the countries and peoples involved in this tragic game.

We must take decisive actions to overturn this policy and get back to fruitful and constructive cooperation between European states and Russia, based on mutual benefit.

Finally, I would like to invite representatives of the European business community to Crimea, to the 6th Yalta International Economic Forum, where we could jointly develop a new positive agenda for our common prosperity.

Members of the NGO “People’s Diplomacy — Norway,” headed by Hendrik Weber, have already visited Crimea multiple times and have seen for themselves the development of the peninsula.

In conclusion, speaking of the sanctions, let me invoke a loosely translated wise quatrain of the great Ancient Near East philosopher and poet Omar Khayyam:

*The more life pushes you around, the more you will achieve,
The more you taste the bitter, the more you’ll love your honey,
The more you’ve cried, the better you will laugh,
The more you’ve brushed with death, the more you’ll know you are alive.*

Georgy Muradov,
Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea,
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Crimea
to President of the Russian Federation.



*Genoese Fortress, Sudak. Photo by: Evgeniya Komarova (Yalta);
archive of the press service of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea.*

Chapter 1.

GEOSTRATEGIC INTEREST

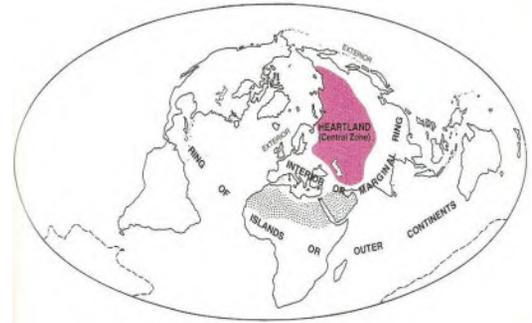
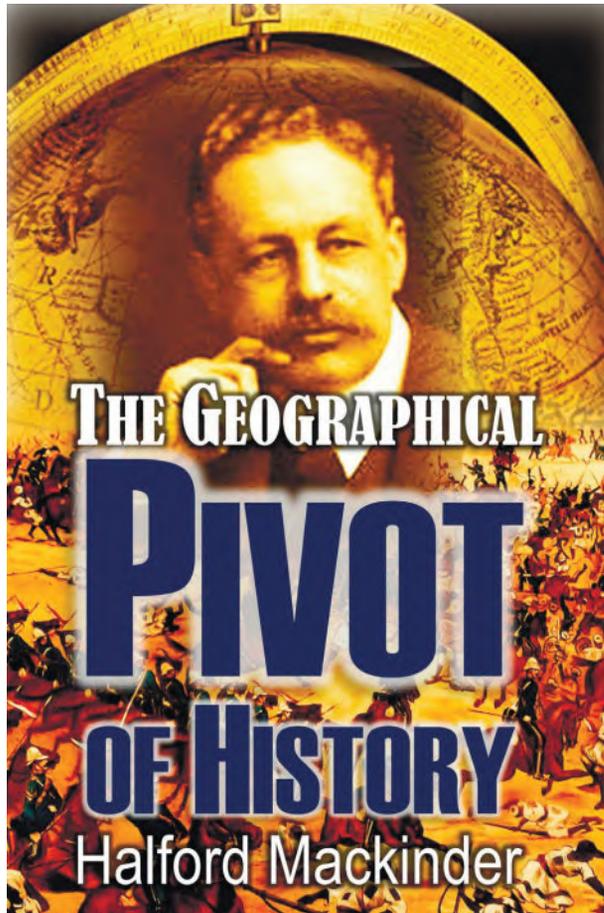
Today, Crimea is one of the major points of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West.

In Eastern Europe, indicators of the processes of the latest geopolitical transformation are Crimea and Novorossia, which have always been predominantly inhabited by Russians over the past centuries.

It is this region in traditional world politics, along with the Balkans, that emerges to be the most important geopolitical node not only of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea Region but also of Eurasia. Whoever owns Crimea largely controls Eastern Europe and much of Eurasia. This seemingly forgotten geopolitical formula has long determined the peninsula's strategic position.

The key position of Eurasia in terms of its ability to control the world was first outlined in a book by the English geographer Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947). He was the first scholar to develop a global geopolitical model that had a significant impact on British and American strategic thinking.

In the early 20th century, he published a book entitled "The Geographical Pivot of History." This work became the basis of the so-called Heartland theory, which is predicated on an



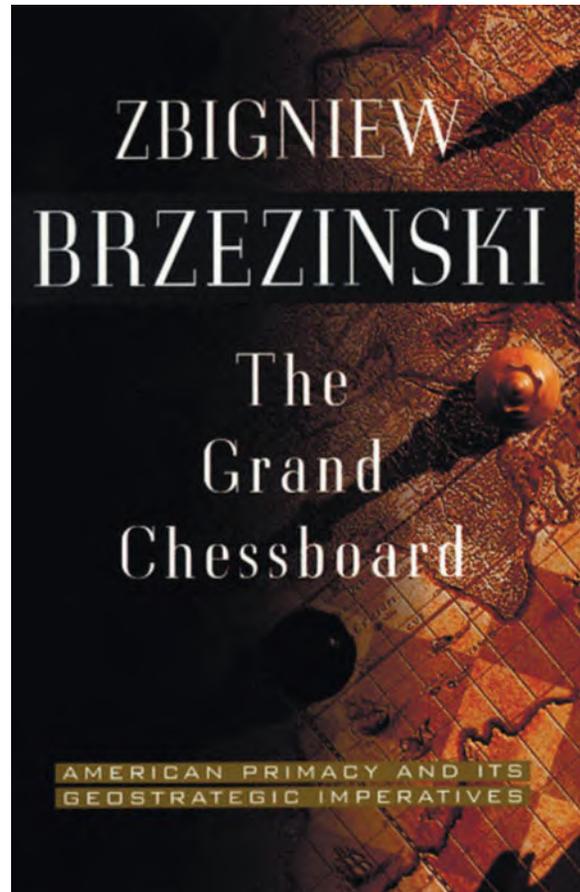
Mackinder's map of Heartland.

*Cover of Halford Mackinder's book
«The Geographical Pivot of History.»*

invasive expansionist policy. Mackinder viewed Heartland as the geographical center of Eurasia or, rather, as the massive central and northeastern part of the Asian continent, generally overlapping with the Asian territories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. It is home to most of the Earth's population and deposits of major natural resources. As in the Mackinder era, Siberia and Central Asia remain reservoirs of raw materials and

energy resources. As before, these lands can be considered the “great natural fortress” of nations, bearing in mind the advanced military arsenal emerged in the 20th century.

The father of British geopolitics claimed, “Whoever rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; whoever rules the World-Island commands the World.” For those skeptical of geopolitical constructs and geopolitical jargon, this train of thought sounds like a meaningless shamanistic incantation. Over the course of a century, Mackinder’s formula has been criticized, adjusted, and disproved many times. Ironically, however, far from merely surviving a century of affronts, this formula looks even more relevant today. Mackinder’s predictions of a post-war geopolitical conflict as a confrontation between “Heartland” (the USSR and now Russia) and the “Outer Crescent,” another key territory comprising mainly Anglo-Saxon countries led by the United States, have come true.



*Cover of Zbigniew Brzezinski's book
«The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy
and Its Geostrategic Imperatives.»*

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However, in their most concentrated form, these views are reflected in publications by Zbigniew Brzezinski. Decades ago, this former National Security Advisor to US President Jimmy Carter outlined in his book how he believed relations on the Eurasian continent should evolve so that the United States could perpetuate its global dominance. According to Brzezinski, in the current global context, there are five key geostrategic actors and five geopolitical hubs. France, Germany, Russia, China, and India are major and active figures in geopolitics. Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Turkey, and Iran act as principally important geopolitical centers, although both Turkey and Iran are, to some extent, also geostrategically active countries. Europe, America's natural ally, "serves as a springboard for the progressive expansion of democracy deeper into Eurasia." Thus, the US has an interest in further pushing EU structures, as well as NATO, eastward. Such a Europe is America's bridgehead on the European continent. Brzezinski fears a strengthening Russia and considers it geopolitically important for America to prevent Ukraine from rejoining the Russian state, keeping Russia predominantly within the nation-state, which would greatly expand the boundaries of American influence in Eurasia. However, let us just quote the American statesman:

"Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state, more likely to be drawn into debilitating conflicts with aroused Central Asians, who would then be resentful of the loss of their recent independence and would be supported by their fellow Islamic states to the south. China would also be likely to oppose any



US President's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski visiting Pakistani troops. Pakistan, Islamabad, 1980. Photo by TASS.

restoration of Russian domination over Central Asia, given its increasing interest in the newly independent states there. However, if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea,

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Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia. Ukraine's loss of independence would have immediate consequences for Central Europe, transforming Poland into the geopolitical pivot on the eastern frontier of a united Europe."

Brzezinski is very accurate in describing the steps he believes the US must take to remain the world's "only premier power." An entire chapter covers the fundamental issues of Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. The main message of the book can be summarized as follows: to maintain its primacy, the US must expand its influence over Europe and separate Europe and Russia from each other. Given the subsequent chain of political events in Europe and the post-Soviet countries in the 21st century, this book can be called to a certain extent as a "play-by-play script", which is now being "readjusted" by the US government. No wonder former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, one of the shrewdest German statesmen, believed that "this book must be read and taken seriously."

Europe has also forgotten, or is trying hard not to recall, that the United States still adheres to the Preventive Action Doctrine, the so-called Wolfowitz Doctrine, named after the US former Secretary of Defense and one of the most notable neocons. The Wolfowitz Doctrine requires the US to maintain its status as the only power in a unipolar world. It was this document that became the foundation of the National Security Strategy of the United States, developed by President George W. Bush's administration in 2002. This strategy is based on the following idea: "Our most fundamental goal is to deter or defeat attack from whatever source... The second goal is to strengthen and extend the system of defense

arrangements that binds democratic and like-minded nations together in common defense against aggression, build habits of cooperation, avoid the renationalization of security policies, and provide security at lower costs and with lower risks for all. Our preference for a collective response to preclude threats or, if necessary, to deal with them is a key feature of our regional defense strategy. The third goal is to preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests, and also thereby to strengthen the barriers against the re-emergence of a global threat to the interests of the U.S. and our allies.”

The so-called Wolfowitz Doctrine resurfaced in the run-up to the Second Persian Gulf War when the US made preemptive strikes against other states a centerpiece part of its foreign policy. Thus, we see that US politicians and strategists act openly and rarely camouflage their intentions. You just need to be able to see the gist. Countless books, interviews, websites of Western and American non-governmental associations and think tanks, and their reports provide insight into the US plans. Therefore, the “conspiracy theorists” should, first and foremost, read books like “The Grand Chessboard” by Brzezinski and compare them against America’s current policies. The interests of the United States in Eurasia are evident. They are seldom revised once the newly elected politicians assume office. The US cannot but dread the consolidation of the Eurasian Heartland, and therefore will continue driving a wedge between Russia and Europe, naturally trying to somehow manage this process without causing a large-scale military conflict with unpredictable consequences.

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“It was necessary for our partners to understand, too, that a country like Russia has and cannot but have its own geopolitical interests,” Putin said in an interview for the documentary “President,” aired by a major Russian TV network a year after Crimea had rejoined Russia. Had he exercised restraint, trying to negotiate with all parties to the conflict without crossing the line of so-called “political correctness,” the new Ukrainian leadership, which is already anti-Russian prodded on by the West, would undoubtedly have discarded the agreement on the Russian Black Sea Fleet stationed in Crimea, force out Russian warships from Crimean ports, and replaced them with NATO and US ships.

A natural conclusion is that any country pursues its own interests in foreign policy, be it the United States or the EU member states. Russia, which has reemerged from chaos and regained strength, is no exception. It once again came to the fore. A belief that the West has no geostrategic interests of its own would be naive, to say the least. The same, I am sure, is true for Russia.

At first glance, it would seem that geopolitical and geostrategic issues do not directly affect us in everyday life, but it is no longer possible to ignore them. Geopolitics has entered the life of common men these days. It both creates and disrupts communities. Sometimes it is the case that the decision of a handful of politicians distorts the livelihoods of millions on a global scale. Historically, there were cases when a single ill-advised signature on a document translated into trouble and destruction for an entire nation or several nations.

If we were to thoroughly analyze the statements of politicians around the world, it would become obvious that they all fit into the context of the struggle between different powers striving for their own agendas and the division of spheres of influence and hence intrinsically have geopolitics nature. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was spot on when he once reportedly said, "In politics, nothing happens by accident. If it happens, you can bet it was planned that way."



*Berkut riot police officers at the protest rally on Independence Square. Kyiv, Ukraine.
February 20, 2014 Photo by Mikhail Pochuev, TASS.*

Chapter 2.

MAIDAN

Maidan. Although it hardly rings any bells with foreigners, for Ukrainians, this Eastern loanword meaning a public square has taken on more connotations; it is indeed a focal point for important political and social events. Maidan is a bell tolling over the disturbed and ravaged country.

2014 saw Maidan come to the fore of Ukrainian politics, driving people apart and inflicting pain and suffering on many, on top of becoming an ultimate weapon wielded by Ukrainian nationalists.

Western governments were unanimous in proclaiming thousands on Maidan Square in Kyiv as “a people” and imposing their will on millions of Ukrainians who would find themselves in anguish. For me, Maidan exemplifies the West’s undiscerning policies.

As violence on Maidan escalated, Ukraine’s full-blown political crisis spiraled into havoc. As a result, others came to power; Donetsk and Luhansk regions were declared independent republics, which devolved into full-scale warfare; Crimea hosted a status referendum on accession to Russia; and a local crisis ended up spurring a reshuffle in international relations.

I suggest recreating things chronologically, that is, documents, accords, declarations, and events. Now, why is it important? Naturally, a person capable of seeing a bigger picture

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cannot be misled by stand-alone facts that are dragged out of context. That is why one of my first chapters of the book is dedicated to Maidan.

Let me remind you that as early as December 19, 2011, at the 15th EU–Ukraine Summit in Kyiv, the leaders of Ukraine (with then-President Viktor Yanukovych) and the EU released a joint statement on the finalization of talks on the Association Agreement. The following year, in Brussels, negotiators of Ukraine and the European Commission initialed the text of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement that is an integral part of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement.

On December 10, 2012, the EU Foreign Affairs Council expressed its commitment in principle to the signing of the Association Agreement, stipulating that the Ukrainian authorities should make tangible progress in reforming its electoral, judiciary and constitutional systems. On February 15, 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted a roadmap for 2013 of priority steps toward the EU integration.

On February 25, 2013, at the 16th EU–Ukraine Summit, the European officials voiced to Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych their dissatisfaction on his actions on implementation of the agenda set out by the EU as the prerequisite for execution of Association Agreement. The parties failed to schedule an exact execution date. At the summit, Ukraine, by then a financially strapped country, signed a Memorandum of Understanding for provision of a Macro-Financial Assistance package of €610 million. However, Ukraine was to receive this amount with another condition on part of the EU - if it resumes cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was at that same summit that the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso stated that

Ukraine might not join the Customs Union established by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan while having the EU Free Trade Area.

In September 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted a draft of the EU Association Agreement. But the European integration did not enjoy unanimous support among the Ukrainian people; while experts warned that the national economy would be going through a difficult juncture of readjusting. Ukraine was hoping to sign the document at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November 2013. Alongside it, Ukraine's commercial and economic relations with Russia had deteriorated: the bilateral trade turnover had dropped 25%. Russia issued a statement warning Ukraine that, once the EU Association Agreement was concluded, it would have no other option but to protect its markets from an influx of foreign products.

On November 18, 2013, the Committee of Foreign Affairs Ministers of the EU convened. Yet again, the members failed to agree on a specific date of signing the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. Ukraine's failure to comply with the necessary requirements was cited as the principal reason for the delay. At the same time, the promises the EU and the IMF gave as to the financial assistance had not been followed through to an extent the Ukrainian side had been hoping for. At least, in part, the Ukrainian government was to blame since it failed to make good on the prior agreements. Besides, the IMF called for extensive administrative reforms that were to boost the transparency of financial expenses. This requirement defied the interests of Ukraine's at that time ruling elite and authorities led by Viktor Yanukovich who - as many experts believed - were mired in corrupt practices. The truth is, neither the Fourth President of Ukraine nor his tycoon friends were willing to take any such actions. Instead, they wanted to keep milking both Russia and the Western world to their advantage.

Years later, in 2016, Ukraine's former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov in an interview with the Telepolis German online magazine pointed out the evident drawbacks of the agreement: "I'd like to share a couple of points regarding the substance of the Association Agreement. Truth be told, the principal thing we can indeed export to Europe is agricultural produce. Which was subject to limits by import quotas. For example, at the start of our talks with Europe, the EU import quota for grain was 20,000 metric tons. During the negotiations, I convinced them to bring it up to at least 200,000 metric tons. But Ukraine produces over 60 million metric tons of grain, of which 30 million potentially could be exported. So quite naturally, it occurred to me: What kind of a free trade agreement is it, given that we cannot export the goods we can export because of the severe import restrictions? Or, we could export more than a million metric tons of meat to the EU. But the quota was set at 20,000 metric tons. Another product we could export were large volumes of steel. Industrial equipment and machinery were also among the potential export items, but those were apparently subject to restrictions governed by the EU technical regulations that differed from Ukrainian standards.

All things considered, in late 2013, it became clear that the economic part of the Association Agreement the way it had been drafted ran counter to Ukrainian interests... So, what we were looking at, as of November 2013 heading into the EU summit? We denied financial assistance meant to overhaul the Ukrainian economy. Raising import quotas was dismissed. The loan was declined. That is why we considered to defer the execution of the agreement until we could reach a compromise on all mentioned issues. And it is this quandary that was used to orchestrate a state coup. Diplomacy-wise, Mr. Barroso's (President of the European Commission between 2004 and 2014) stance could not be clearer:

‘If you don’t sign it, it will be signed by a different president or different prime minister.’ I believe this statement clearly illustrates the kind of relations the EU authorities had with Ukraine.”

But let us get back to the events of November 2013. Stymied by the endless and ever-growing demands of the West, the Ukrainian government turned to its Eastern neighbor: Russia. On November 21, it decided to put on hold the preparations for the signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, and accelerate negotiations with Russia. For Russia, getting Ukraine involved in the Eurasian trade and economic relations equaled a resounding political success. In the years prior to that, Russia had been trying hard to draw Ukraine into its integration endeavors.

Now, it is worth noting that the West tends to underestimate or even, I’m convinced, flagrantly to overlook the deep-rooted bonds between Ukraine and Russia. Although during the two decades prior to the bloody Maidan crisis, these two related nations were formally separated by the state borders, it would not prevent them from setting up a common space for strategic partnerships and alliances. For more than a millennium, these nations profess Orthodox Christianity, that being the spiritual foundation of the Eastern Slav civilization. The common historic roots of Russians and Ukrainians date back to the times of Kyivan Rus’. For over three centuries, they resided within the boundaries of a unified state: the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire, and the USSR. This was an unprecedented vital formation that has no analogs in the history. The 2011 sociology surveys conducted in the Ukraine pointed to the overwhelming support the Ukrainian people had for the integration efforts between their country and Russia. Roughly half of the population had a positive outlook of Ukraine joining the common with Russia Economic Space. The idea

was massively endorsed in Southeast regions, while the Western parts of the country were least enthusiastic.

Thus, politically speaking, Ukraine became an apple of discord as both the West and the East harbored ambitions of a common future. The same time, the country had neither economic nor political resources to challenge, let alone propose, any of the integration schemes to foreign partners. Following his erratic slalom run between the EU and the Customs Union, President Yanukovich signed an agreement with Russia in December 2013. Moscow offered him a financial aid package in form of \$15 billion credit loan. To this end, the Russian Federation was prepared to allocate the amount from the Russian National Wealth Fund to purchase Ukraine's sovereign Eurobonds. The two governments also negotiated a discount for the Russian gas supply.

On December 23, 2013, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said in a statement that the day before, December 22, Russia had paid \$3 billion for the first Ukrainian Eurobond package at a 5% annual interest rate with a maturity date of January 1, 2016. The loan terms included interim bi-annual coupon payouts.

The Russian party, in turn, offered Ukraine to join the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan as a member state. The offer jeopardized the execution of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. It would mean that, the imported to the Ukraine duty-free goods from, e.g., France could have been forwarded within the Customs Union to Russia or Kazakhstan duty-free as well. Although President Putin was open to negotiation with the EU and Ukraine as to the compromise, his idea was dismissed by the European Union in high dudgeon.

It all set the political scene for the upcoming drama on Maidan, the largest square of the Ukrainian capital. Beginning November 2013, it became the venue for the full-fledged Ukrainian protest staged by disgruntled dissenters and activists who got sick of the low standard of living and rampant corruption¹. A makeshift camp was staged on the square where the activists of the protest movement were stationed 24/7.

There was a time when Ukraine was one of the most economically robust and thriving Soviet republics. But a quarter-century into its independence, the nation's economic and social development figures plummeted well below the median European level. The gross domestic product per capita in Ukraine was \$4,000 per year. As a comparison: for a small European country, such as Slovakia, this figure was about \$19,000. Ukraine's economic growth in 2013–2014 was close to zero, the economy was stagnant, and society was growing indignant at the lawlessness and corruption of Mr. Yanukovich's creatures and his far-flung clan in the regions.

¹ The word «Maidan» is used to refer to various events in recent Ukrainian history, including the 1990 student protest, the 2004 Orange Revolution, and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan, as all of these took place on Independence Square, or Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Ukrainian.



*An injured individual at the riot on Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Kyiv, Ukraine.
February 20, 2014 Photo by Mikhail Pochuev, TASS*

Chapter 2.1.

THE TIMELINE OF THE TRAGEDY

Western media often make a mistake in thinking that the majority of Ukrainians approved of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The reality was far from that. For the people of Ukraine, the most pressing issue was the improvement of living conditions. In her book “To Understand Russia,” Gabriele Krone-Schmalz cites the Gorchenin Institute of Management Issues, an independent Kyiv-based think tank, which polled Ukrainians on Maidan on December 2, 2013. According to the survey, 55% of the protesters, mostly students, joined the crowd to topple the government. 27% favored the EU Association Agreement. The remaining 18% of the polled cited other reasons than Association Agreement that prompted them to join the protesters.

The protest was to be terminated by mutual agreement between the Kyiv city administration and the students’ coordination committee on November 29 at midnight, as the next day, the city authorities were planning on setting up a traditional Christmas market on the square. However, on the night of November 30 to December 1, 2013, the unexpected happened: the Kyiv police had to use force to subdue a part of aggressive protesters.

In an interview, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov offers the following account: “At about 4:30 in the morning, about a hundred people, members of the radical Right Sector movement, armed with iron rods and clubs, came down to Maidan from the Hotel Ukraine.



UDAR party leader Vitali Klitschko, left, and US Senator John McCain at People's Rally on Independence Square. "People's Veche" on Independence Square in Kyiv, Ukraine. December 15, 2013. Photo by Valery Sharifulin, TASS.

They began striking at the few police officers scattered on the square. A round-the-clock police CCTV camera captured the footage. I saw these clips. The Right Sector militants were clutching smoldering firebrands, which had previously been ignited in burning trash cans, and tried to rub them in the faces of police officers. The police requested backup. That is when teams of Berkut, a special force unit, arrived on the scene. They began to disperse the

militants. Those who initially stayed in the Maidan tent camp were pushed away, too. At that point, all the Ukrainian and European TV network crews started filming what was happening and then made regular reruns of that footage on the air.”

National TV networks, most of which are owned by different oligarchs, kept broadcasting pictures of the wounded and beaten students, focusing on their young age and injuries. Then, as if on cue, the same TV networks called on Ukrainian citizens to hit the Maidan and occupy the administrative buildings. The protests were swiftly joined by representatives of several opposition political parties, including right wing radical Svoboda Party (lit.: Freedom Party), led by Oleg Tyahnybok, and the paramilitary Right Sector. Several protesters had Molotov cocktails and firearms with them.

Over the course of December 2013 and January 2014, protests escalated, and dissenters occupied and blocked a number of administrative buildings not only in Kyiv, but in other cities across the country. Gradually, things began to heat up on Maidan, taking a sharp turn for the worse: the first wounded required medical attention. The square got filled with thousands of people who were brought in buses from all over Ukraine. Provocative visits to Maidan by well-known politicians from Europe and the United States fanned the flames even further. They publicly expressed their solidarity with the protesters. On December 4, then-German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle addressed the crowd, followed by the US State Department officer Victoria Nuland on December 10, and US Senator John McCain on December 15.

Prime Minister Azarov comments: “Western diplomats and politicians sounded a constant mantra, discouraging the powers-that-be from using force against the protesters under any circumstances. I personally know that Mr. Biden [the then-US Vice President] issued an overt threat to President Yanukovich: if he dispersed the demonstration, he would become

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persona non grata in Europe and around the world. And sanctions would be imposed on him. These words and threats psychologically disoriented Yanukovich, who was already acting very indecisively, and actually encouraged the putschists to escalate things further. It would not have been a problem to deal with them, had Yanukovich used the presidential powers invested in him by the Constitution. An attempted armed coup is a crime anywhere in the world. Killing police officers is a crime, too, and so is illegal armed occupation of property. It begs the questions: Why wasn't the entire security apparatus of the country responding to these crimes for three months?"

President Viktor Yanukovich, who in many ways was engaged in double-dealing and even initiated peaceful protests on Maidan, was hesitant to stop the protests by force and now was unable to get his points heard. As the protests on Maidan intensified, the Anti-Maidan movement also emerged in Kyiv, near Mariinsky Park. The Park hosted protesters from southern and eastern parts of Ukraine. They demanded that the president to restore order nationwide. However, those protests received little to no coverage in the national and international media.

So, I am offering the reader a timeline of events that unfolded back then.

On January 1, 2014, about 15,000 neo-Nazis marched through downtown Kyiv in honor of Stepan Bandera's 105th birthday. The torchlit rally was organized by the Freedom Party. Participants were heard chanting: "Death to the enemies!", "Ukraine above all!", and "Glory to Ukraine!" European media, however, chose to keep a tight lid on the march. Otherwise, eerie scenes of the torchlit procession along the Kyivan streets would have reminded the Western audience of similar marches staged by the Hitlerites ahead of World War II.

On January 28, 2014, Mykola Azarov, one of the few people from President Yanukovich's entourage trying to bring some sort of order to the nation, stepped down as prime minister along with his government.

On February 18, 2014, around 1:30 p.m., the violence on Maidan re-escalated. Five Berkut riot police officers were gunned down by the protesters, and many were injured. The Kyiv office of the Party of Regions was burned down by nationalists. One person burned alive in the building. Other sources cite three fatalities. The violence came from the Right Sector, which the day before had spoken of a "peaceful protest."

On February 19, 2014, protesters seized the Main Post Office and the conservatory building. The Trade Unions Building was set ablaze; state institutions were seized and unlawfully occupied in western Ukrainian cities. In the evening, Yanukovich met with opposition leaders, but the talks drew a blank.

On February 20, 2014, a convoy of buses carrying Crimean Anti-Maidan protesters was stopped by radical nationalist units on their way back from Kyiv to Crimea. People were forced off the buses and severely beaten. At least six people were shot dead, and more than twenty are still missing. This crime remains unsolved.

On that same day, Maidan yet again saw a spike in violence. More than 45 people were killed by unidentified snipers. Among the victims were both protesters and Berkut fighters. Most of the European media attributed this crime to the Berkut fighters, who were ordered to patrol the square by the government.

To this day, five years later, that is, these facts have not been fully released to the public, though the putschists who later came to power in Ukraine had all the administrative leverage

they needed to do so. Since April 2014, a team from the European Court of Human Rights had been investigating the events. Back in September 2014, its representatives reported that their work was being obstructed by the Ukrainian government of Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch who was an active putschist and one of the major sponsors behind the Maidan turmoil.

On February 20, 2014, the foreign ministers of Germany, Poland, and France visited Kyiv to mediate an agreement between the opposition parties and President Yanukovich. The Freedom Party and its chairman, Oleg Tyahnybok, were also present at the talks. The agreement, signed a day later, on February 21, included the following important clauses (and I am quoting):

1. Within 48 hours of the signing of this agreement, a special law shall be passed, signed, and promulgated that will restore the 2004 Constitution of Ukraine as amended up to that time. The signatories declare their intention to form a coalition and form a government of national unity within 10 days thereafter.
2. Work on the constitutional reform, which balances the powers of the president, government, and parliament, shall begin immediately and be completed in September 2014.
3. Presidential elections shall be held immediately after the adoption of the new Constitution, but no later than December 2014. New electoral legislation shall be passed and a new Central Election Commission shall be formed on a proportional basis in accordance with OSCE and Venice Commission rules.
4. The investigation into the recent violence shall be conducted under the joint monitoring of the authorities, the opposition, and the Council of Europe.

5. The authorities shall not declare a state of emergency. The authorities and the opposition shall refrain from using force.

The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine shall pass a third exemption law, which will apply to the same offenses as the law dated February 17, 2014.

Both sides shall make considerable efforts to normalize life in cities, towns, and villages by vacating administrative and public buildings and unblocking streets and squares.

Illegal weapons shall be surrendered to the authorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine within 24 hours after the above-mentioned special law (Paragraph 1 of this Agreement) has entered into force.

After this period, all cases of illegal carrying and storage of weapons shall be prosecuted in accordance with the current legislation of Ukraine. Both the opposition and government forces shall work toward assuaging the confrontation. The authorities shall use law enforcement solely for the physical protection of government buildings.

6. The foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Poland and the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation call for an immediate end to all violence and confrontation.

However, as it turned out, no one planned to adhere to the clauses of the “anti-crisis pact” with Yanukovich. The leaders of the so-called Maidan Self-Defense units decried the document as a scam. Dmytro Yarosh, the leader of the Right Sector, announced on Maidan that the Right Sector would not lay down their weapons and would not vacate the seized buildings until the president resigned. As early as the next day, February 22, the “revolutionaries” completely occupied the government quarter left by law enforcement officers: the Verkhovna Rada, the

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Presidential Administration, the Cabinet, and the Interior Ministry. The ecstatic crowd on Maidan chanted slogans for the immediate resignation of President Yanukovich.

On February 22, 2014, the country saw a violent, armed coup d'état. The Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, violated the agreements between President Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition leaders as they amended the Constitution, replaced the leadership of the parliament and the Interior Ministry, and deposed the head of state.

72.89% of MPs voted in favor of the decision, while the required minimum was 75%. Most of the European media reported only in passing that there were armed men in camouflage uniforms in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine during the vote. Several deputies were beaten or prevented against their will from attending the session in front of the parliament building. By a constitutional majority of 326 votes, the Verkhovna Rada accepts the resignations of deputy speakers Volodymyr Rybak and Igor Kaletnik and elects Oleksandr Turchynov as its new chairman. On February 27, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament approved the list of members of the so-called "government of people's trust," with one of the leaders of the Maidan events, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, as prime minister.

Amazingly, the European Union, which guaranteed the agreement with the signatures of the foreign ministers of Germany and Poland and the representative of the French Foreign Ministry, endorsed the coup and almost immediately recognized the new authorities in Kyiv as legitimate.

President Yanukovich was forced to hastily flee Kyiv to Kharkiv, a large city in the eastern part of the country. Here he was planning to attend a congress of deputies from the southeastern regions of Ukraine and Crimea. In the build-up to the congress, its organizers stated: in view of the lack of power in the nation and in Kyiv, Kharkiv is ready to become the capital

of Ukraine. The congress had good prospects in terms of effectively resisting the coup and bringing the situation back within the confines of the Constitution. The local authorities of the southeastern regions (except for Odessa and Mykolaiv, which did not participate in the congress) were to assume responsibility for ensuring constitutional order and enforcement of law and the rights of citizens on their territory until the constitutional order in Kyiv was secured. But the president never joined the congress. Allegedly, his guards advised him against participating in the event because thousands of Euromaidan activists blocked the entrance to the building. There, in Kharkiv, Yanukovich gave his first interview after he had fled Kyiv.

“My car was shot at. But... I have no fear. Instead, I am overcome with grief for our country,” said Yanukovich. Later that day, he flew to Donetsk, from which he headed to Crimea. In the film “Crimea: The Way Back Home” directed by journalist Andrei Kondrashov, Russian President Vladimir Putin recalled that the Ukrainian president had tried to break through to Crimea, but an armed ambush had been waiting for him on the way, so it had been decided to send Russian helicopters for Yanukovich, who had been constantly communicating with Putin. The motorcade was intercepted near Berdiansk. Thus, the attempt of the eastern regions of Ukraine to put up resistance against the putschists failed.

And now let us see what was going on in the “legal” domain. According to Article 108 of the Constitution of Ukraine, the grounds for early termination of powers of the President of Ukraine are: 1) resignation, 2) inability to perform their powers for health reasons, 3) removal from office by impeachment, and 4) death of the president. Special rules apply in impeachment proceedings under Article 111, such as the establishment of an investigative task force.² None of the clauses of the Ukrainian constitution was observed, nor was the necessary vote

² To conduct the investigation, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine establishes a special temporary investigative task force, which includes a special prosecutor and special investigators.

by at least two-thirds of the constitutional members of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine ever obtained. Therefore, legally, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich remained in office even after February 22, 2014. In this regard, we are dealing with a coup d'état, which clearly violated the Constitution of Ukraine. This triggered the war in eastern Ukraine.

In the interview mentioned above, former Prime Minister Azarov had no two ways about it: "It was clearly a coup d'état. But it is as clear that it was necessary to sugarcoat the coup with a certain democratic look. That's why Maidan was painted as a revolution."

The governor and deputies of the Russian-speaking southeast of Ukraine questioned the legitimacy of the parliament in Kyiv. Many of them accused the European Union and the United States of being directly involved in the coup. Some of these accusations do hold water: according to numerous sources, the protesters were paid and transported to take part in the Maidan events.

As early as February 24, 2014, the European Commission recognized the deposal of President Viktor Yanukovich, who was still in Ukraine, thus, signaling to the general public that it was ready to sign the Association Agreement with the new Ukrainian government.

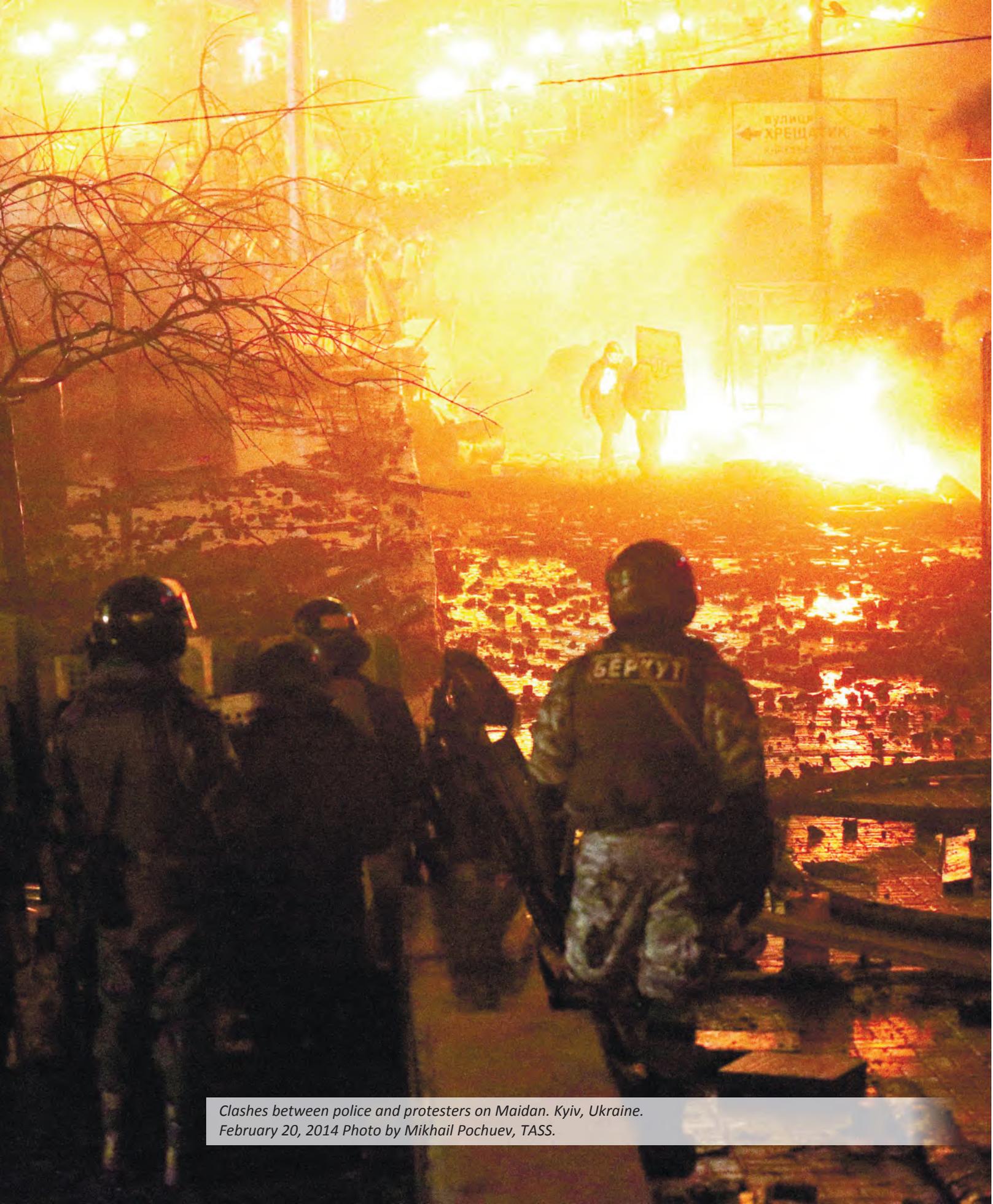
On March 21, the political section of the Association Agreement was signed with Arseniy Yatsenyuk as the representative of the interim government. Shortly afterward, the EU, the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) provided Ukraine with a financial aid package and a \$30 billion loan, which, however, proved to be far from enough.

On June 27, 2014, newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed the economic section of the EU Association Agreement.

One of the first resolutions the new parliament passed on February 23 was to ban Russian as an official language. The bill was authored by the right-wing populist Freedom Party and did not enter into force only because the Chairman of the Parliament, Oleksandr Turchynov, ruled it was too early to sign it.

On February 25, 2014, a snap presidential election was scheduled to be held in May.

On May 25, 2014, oligarch Petro Poroshenko, known as the Chocolate King for owning the country's largest confectionery company, won the presidential election, earning 54.70% of the popular vote with a turnout of 59.48% (with the eastern parts of Ukraine did not participate in voting). His main rival, Yuliya Timoshenko, leader of the Fatherland party, received 12.82%. The inauguration of the new Ukrainian president was attended by German President Joachim Gauck, who thus once again proved the glaring lack of political intuition among the European political elites.



*Clashes between police and protesters on Maidan. Kyiv, Ukraine.
February 20, 2014 Photo by Mikhail Pochuev, TASS.*

Chapter 2.2.

MAIDAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Let us get back to the Maidan events. An analysis of what took place on Kyiv's central square will allow us to clearly separate the truth from lies and propagandist chicanery. Just a reminder: addressing the Maidan crowd, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland said: "We stand with the people of Ukraine for justice, human dignity, and security. For the strengthening of the economy and for the European future that it sees and deserves. We have witnessed tremendous violence inflicted by government troops. Special forces used a bulldozer and tear gas against protesters on Maidan while they sang anthems and prayed for peace. You had to be on Maidan to feel the energy, the hope of the Ukrainians, spreading from Kyiv across the country. People of all ages, social strata, and walks of life are taking their future into their own hands and demanding rapprochement with the EU. They do it very peacefully, with great courage and great dedication."

These statements were an egregious lie as pictures and video footage from Maidan prove the opposite. Berkut officers behaved quite calmly at first and were even instructed not to ignore violent provocations of the protesters. Viktor Yanukovich's government withdrew Berkut and police units from Maidan, as agreed upon with European foreign ministers, thus paving the way for extremists to storm the government quarter. The presence of snipers in the back rows of the protesting crowd in Kyiv and among the Berkut special forces as well as

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the arson of the Anti-Maidan activists in the Trade Unions Building in Odessa (May 2, 2014) are often misrepresented in Western media. The investigation into the deaths in Kyiv found that the shots had been fired from the top floors of the Ukraine Hotel. However, during the Maidan protests, the hotel was controlled by the protesters. Even five years on, the details and perpetrators of the crime have not been identified, and the investigators have seemingly run out of leads.

Former Prime Minister Azarov pointed out in 2016 that “for three years, representatives of the prosecutor’s office and the police haven’t found a single witness or otherwise proved that the snipers were from Yanukovych’s structures or from Berkut. Or somehow proved that the snipers were on an assignment from former Interior Minister Zakharchenko or Yanukovych. I reiterate, three years — no evidence yet. Speaking of that, we have a bulk of evidence that, in particular, Yatsenyuk, Poroshenko, Pashinsky, and Turchynov — the leaders of the Maidan — were directly involved in the organization of the armed clashes.”

The double standards can be clearly seen in the Western media’s assessment of the tragic events in Odessa on May 2, 2014. Opponents of the new government barricaded themselves in the local Trade Unions Building, which was intentionally set ablaze by the nationalists. The unfortunate people trying to get out of it were beaten and killed.

At the same time, the West reported that “during the clashes in Odessa, a pro-Russian tent camp was set on fire, followed by the adjacent Trade Unions Building, and dozens of people were killed.” All of this ran parallel to the comments about “pro-Russian violence” in the eastern regions of Ukraine or even about a “pro-Russian flash mob.” Of course, there were exceptions, which, nonetheless, confirmed the general trend. For example, Spiegel Online posted on its website on March 3, 2014 that “the police idly watched the Trade Unions Building

being burned down in Odessa, a city in southern Ukraine. Dozens of pro-Russian activists were killed in the process. The governor praised the arsonists as they had neutralized the terrorists...”

Rarely do Western sources cover the background of Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the European Union. Most newspaper articles and political pundits celebrated the accession of a new partner who would soon finally be able to “enjoy” our Western democracy as well. Ukraine, they claimed, had to choose either of the two options. “The Association was conceived as an alternative to membership in the Customs Union with Russia. What the European Commission had been consistently doing in recent years was a de facto accession negotiation. I am sure, and this has become quite clear in the debates of recent days, that it cannot be good in the long run if you put Ukraine before an impossible choice between saying “Yes” to Europe and “No” to Russia,” SPD spokesman Niels Annen said in an interview with Deutsche Welle.

Another political commentator, Theo Sommer, wrote in his column in Zeit: “Ukraine is still far from the internal condition that would allow it to be included in the Western family. Apparently, it is an unviable state or even an already bankrupt looter state, a kleptocratic state made up of bribe-fueled bureaucrats and billionaire oligarchs. The rule of law does not exist there. The economy is in free fall. President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatsenyuk represent antagonistic forces. The more or less decent ministers who do care are resigning from their posts. Reforms are not moving forward. The implementation of the Minsk Protocol is not on the cards. No electoral law was passed, and Donbass was not granted more autonomy through constitutional amendments. All this has not only prevented Ukraine from assimilating into the Brussels community but is dragging it back into its historically established web of relations with Russia. This would not be an indulgence in and submission to Russian ambitions, but

a real political approach to balancing interests with Moscow... However, Brussels did things differently, and Ukraine was forced to take this decision.”

Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder pointed to the same circumstance in one of his interviews: “In the Association Agreement, given Ukraine’s cultural divisions, the EU should not have formulated ‘either/or’ — it would have been more reasonable to phrase it ‘... as well as...’”

Importantly, already in 2010–2013, during the negotiations with the EU, President Yanukovich and Prime Minister Azarov were concerned about the evident drawbacks of the Agreement for Ukraine and the hazard it posed to the Ukrainian economy.

The new Agreement has these shortcomings further amplified through the inclusion of military cooperation clauses. For example, Article 10 of the Association Agreement stipulates Ukraine’s participation in EU civil and military crisis management operations, as well as in relevant exercises and drills, in particular, those conducted as part of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) (formerly known as the European Security and Defense Policy).

Many of the phrasings in the new Agreement are so obfuscated that their meaning is barely deducible. But if you scrutinize the term “common security and defense policy” (CSDP), you will be quick to discover that it refers to joint participation in military operations conducted around the world. It is important factor in the mechanism of military partnership between the EU and NATO. In light of this, Russia’s fears that if Ukraine joins the European Union, it will automatically be dragged into the NATO military bloc as well become justified. All this creates a potential threat to Russian interests, disturbs the balance of power on the European continent, and undermines security in Europe.

In concluding this chapter on the Maidan events, let me offer some thoughts. Everyone is still reaping the murky fruits of Euromaidan. These include an ongoing war in Donbass, social and economic slumps, depreciation of the national currency, reduced incomes of Ukrainians, shrinking population, loss of territories, split society, damaged relations with the neighboring brotherly Russian nation — to name but a few repercussions of the events of those days. However, it is noteworthy that assessments in the Western media both now and then largely overlook the specific historical situation of the events that took place in Ukraine in 2014. They lack any solid rooting in facts, instead, regurgitating a series of politicized conclusions. This is true for the violence of the Maidan protesters, the sniper victims, the fire in the Trade Unions Building in Odessa, and, of course, the entire set of association agreements between Ukraine and the European Union.

After many years, it seems to me that the leadership of the European Union has never had any interest in comprehensively informing us, the citizens, about what was going on in Kyiv. And I know why: if someone is “investing” \$5 billion to topple the Ukrainian government, as State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland described it, they are probably not interested in discussing this issue with “enlightened” Europeans at all.



More than 10,000 people gathered in front of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. February 26, 2014. Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

Chapter 3.

VLADIMIR KONSTANTINOV

The Kyiv protests in late 2013, which ended in violence and the illegitimate overthrow of the Ukrainian government, were of great concern to residents of Crimea and Russian-speaking Donbass.

I would like to expand on the timeline of events in Crimea based on the book by the current speaker of the Crimean Parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, titled “To Go One’s Own Way” (published in 2017).

Offering a political and an insider’s perspective of the dramatic changes taking place in the Crimea and Ukraine, Konstantinov not only voices his opinion but also unearths the causes of the events, explaining the actions of the participants and reflecting on what he saw. This makes Konstantinov’s book a historically unique document. At the time, Vladimir Konstantinov served as Deputy Chairman of the ruling Ukrainian Party of Regions and Speaker of the Crimean Parliament. He gave me his book in October 2017 as our first Norwegian delegation visited Crimea.

Since 2016, I have met with Vladimir Konstantinov several times in Simferopol, in Yalta, and in Donetsk. He took the opportunity to talk about his personal experiences in the spring of 2014 and Crimea’s prospects.

Our Crimea | Vladimir Konstantinov



One of the book's protagonists is the Chairman of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov. Photo from the personal archive of Hendrick Weber.

For Vladimir Konstantinov, the principle of people's diplomacy is one of the most important priorities: "Come, see for yourselves, and arrive at your own conclusions about the situation in Crimea." He writes that the idea of reunification with Russia has been around since the early years of Ukrainian independence. This idea was shared and then supported by the vast majority of Crimean residents at the referendum. However, no one could believe that they would live to see an actual reunion.

One has to bear in mind that since 1991, the population of Crimea has consistently fought for the preservation of its "Russianness," the Russian language and culture. The level of

pro-Russian sentiment in Crimea was higher than in the unrecognized post-Soviet states of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. For Russia, the loss of Sevastopol and Crimea tangibly embodied the collapse of the USSR and the image of a “humiliated nation,” a divided Russian people. However, the Kremlin and the administration of former Russian President Boris Yeltsin showed complete indifference to that sentiment, while Ukrainian authorities capitalized on it to eliminate Crimean sovereignty and restrict autonomy. They skillfully took advantage of the internal contradictions between the President of the Republic of Crimea Yury Meshkov and the deputies of the Supreme Council of the republic and finally succeeded in having the provision on state sovereignty of the republic excluded from the constitution. The post of President of the Republic of Crimea was also eliminated. In fact, the level of Crimean autonomy of Crimea was reduced to a minimum. Unsurprisingly, following the elimination of all forms of regional independence, the majority of the Russian population of Crimea perceived Ukraine as a foreign and hostile state. Attempts at Ukrainianization, the imposition of the Ukrainian account of history on the local population, and a pronounced policy of assimilation have all caused people to reject it. And as the attempts by the new Kyiv government and its proxies to impose ideals and values alien to the residents of Sevastopol and Crimea picked up the speed, so did the rejection of Ukrainian statehood itself. The events of the winter and spring of 2014 in Sevastopol and Crimea culminated the processes that had taken place on the peninsula in the preceding 23 years. Vladimir Konstantinov describes how he and many others were shocked by the torchlight rally of Ukrainian neo-Nazis who through Kyiv on January 1, 2014. It was then that he first had a hunch that a possible task for regional politicians of his generation would be the return of Crimea to Russia.



FOREVER WITH RUSSIA. March 1, 2014, Sevastopol, Nakhimov Square. Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

In December 2013, he participated for the last time in a meeting of the Council of Regions in Kyiv. The city center around Maidan was cordoned off, and the deputies were heavily guarded. At the same time, clashes erupted between police and protesters and devolved into a violent confrontation. Konstantinov could not believe that President Viktor Yanukovich, instead of analyzing the current critical situation, spoke about Lviv's bid for the Winter Olympics. The country was on the brink of a civil war and disaster, but

other parliamentarians also seemed stubbornly oblivious to what was happening on the streets of the Ukrainian capital.

On Sunday, December 15, 2013, thousands of Crimean residents traveled to Kyiv to participate in a rally in support of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's "Save Ukraine" policy. A rally to send off the Crimean delegation was held on Lenin Square in Simferopol. Meanwhile, events in Kyiv were taking a turn for the worse. At the very beginning of 2014, the republican authorities appealed to President Viktor Yanukovich, to the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, and to Ukrainian MPs, urging them to put a stop to rampant lawlessness, anarchy, and violence that battered the country and to declare a national emergency. On February 12, 2014, an all-Ukrainian forum of representatives of regional councils and the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea was held at the Livadia Palace in Yalta, where one of the last attempts by the regional authorities to overcome the political crisis was made. Representatives of the Volyn, Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, and Vinnytsia regional councils and Kyiv city council turned down the invitations. Speaking at the forum, Vladimir Konstantinov said that the model of Crimean autonomy, laid down in the Constitution of Ukraine and the 1998 Constitution of Crimea, had ultimately proved inefficient. "We want a completely different kind of autonomy. We should go back to some of the regulations effective in the early 1990s." At a task force meeting in the parliament, experienced lawyers who had participated in the drafting of the Crimean constitution highlighted the following problematic and debatable issues:

1. Ukraine joined the UN was listed as a UN state without Crimea.
2. The 1954 transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was illegitimate.
3. Kyiv authorities had consistently violated the special rights granted to Crimea (the status of an Autonomous Republic), and in the spring of 1995, in fact, an anti-constitutional coup

was carried out. If the OSCE had not acted as a guarantor of Crimean autonomy, Crimea would have lost its autonomous status.

4. The 1998 Constitution of Crimea, still effective at the time of March 2014 referendum, provided for the mandatory participation of the autonomous republic in shaping Ukrainian foreign policy. This right had been repeatedly violated as Crimea had never been consulted about joining the European Union or NATO.

February 4, 2014. The Presidium of the Supreme Council convened a conference to discuss an all-Crimean poll on the status of the peninsula. At the same time, the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) launched a criminal probe into Konstantinov's actions "in connection with an attempted encroachment on the territorial integrity of Ukraine."

On February 18, as the street fighting in Kyiv entered its final, bloodiest phase, the Presidium of the Crimean Supreme Council for the last time called for President Yanukovich to declare a state of emergency. Konstantinov said: "I understand that from today's perspective, our actions look politically naive. We tried to obey the law at a time when the laws themselves were no longer in effect. They were replaced by coup mechanisms. But we were not going to resemble the insurgents and simply did our duty to the people of Crimea."

According to Konstantinov, the Crimean government was doing the right things in that historical context. He is positive that studying the events preceding the referendum and analyzing records from that period will be of great importance when the large-scale process of international recognition of the reunification of Crimea with Russia begins.

On February 20, 2014, armed Maidan militants attacked a convoy of buses carrying Crimean residents who were returning from Kyiv after rallies in support of constitutional order.

Buses were pulled over in the Korsun-Shevchenko district of the Cherkassy Region. People were forced out at gunpoint, stripped in the freezing cold, pushed to the ground, and severely beaten. According to eyewitnesses' accounts, Crimeans were forced to eat shards from the shattered bus windows. According to the official estimates of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, seven people died. More than two dozen people are presumed missing. Konstantinov was shell-shocked by this incident. He tried to get information and called on the national government to investigate the case. However, no one has ever been charged in this crime.

On the same day, February 20, he gave an interview to the Interfax news agency. At that time, he had not yet heard about the attack in the Cherkasy Region. Asked by a reporter whether he thought if, in case things deteriorated further, the Crimeans were to hold a referendum on secession from Ukraine, Konstantinov replied that he would rather dodge the question because Crimea remained a pillar of the central government and the Crimeans did not want to harm it. But if the country crumbled, "then the only way we will be left with is the denunciation of the 1954 acts on the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine."

Konstantinov goes on to write that the UN Declaration lists the right of peoples to self-determination among the fundamental principles of international law, as well as the principle of the territorial integrity of the state. But there was a coup d'état in Kyiv, and the elected president was illegally removed from power. Thus, this right was violated. From the very beginning, it was their principle to act only by legal means: "The Crimean Constitution provided for the right to a referendum, but in practice, the Crimeans could only exercise their right to secede from Ukraine and return to Russia in one case: if the Ukrainian state legally ceased to exist."

Our Crimea | Vladimir Konstantinov

Back in January 2014, Konstantinov traveled to Moscow for consultations on the situation in Crimea with representatives of some political forces, NGOs, and law enforcement agencies. He asked all of them the following question: What do you think the Crimeans can do if the insurgents succeed in overthrowing the legitimate authorities? He did not get a definite answer, though, and he was assured that Yanukovich would successfully resist. Konstantinov responded that the Crimean government was, of course, fighting for central power to the best of its ability. But he believed that it was important not to miss the moment. If Yanukovich were to be overthrown, then Crimea could rejoin Russia, both morally and legally.

Such an opportunity — surreal and unique — was presented to the Crimean government by the militants themselves. The successful coup and the flight of elected President Viktor Yanukovich meant the legal demise of the state of Ukraine, established in 1991. There was no president or government, and an illegitimate team seized power in Kyiv. “They were clear about their goals as they chanted ‘Death to Russians!’ and tried to abolish our republic. All these proclamations were public. They wanted to destroy us,” writes Konstantinov.

This new dynamic “opened up a real opportunity to legally set sail from the Ukrainian coast, seized by a Nazi insurgency, and to dock at the Russian coast.” However, Konstantinov wanted certain guarantees from the Russian government in Moscow. And there were no such guarantees. This ushered in a new stage of the struggle for the residents of Crimea, and the result was unpredictable.

On February 20, 2014, Konstantinov received the news of his father-in-law’s death. The demise of the family member prevented him from participating in the congress of regional governors in Kharkiv, which was scheduled for the next day. Several of his fellow Crimean MPs still went to attend the congress.

The venue for the congress and the buses for delegates were blocked by the Maidan militants, threatening to terminate the “separatists.” The event organizers led the Crimean delegation back to the railroad terminal using backroads. Konstantinov, ironically calling himself “Crimea’s separatist-in-chief,” notes that if he had been present at this congress, the rebels would have gone to greater lengths to prevent the Crimean delegation from leaving. The death of his father-in-law may have saved him and his associates from great misfortune. Besides, on that same day, he received a tip from a high-ranking Ukrainian official to leave Crimea immediately. Konstantinov was told publicly that he had already said enough to be sentenced to at least 15 years in prison. However, he chose to stay.

In his opinion, he and his allies had only one chance left, namely, “go to Moscow, ask to see Putin, and consult on what to do in a situation of legal collapse.” They needed international guarantees for their actions. On the same day, Konstantinov received a message that a group of 300 people had gathered in front of the parliament building in Simferopol, waiting to talk to him. They were pro-Russian activists and were waiting for him to say what the Crimean authorities intended to do to prevent a Kyiv-style Maidan in Crimea. “We didn’t have a clear answer to that. I was touched by people’s attitude: they said they were ready to defend Crimea, that they would not betray us and we could count on their help,” stressed Konstantinov.

At the same time, supporters of Euromaidan in Crimea were gearing up for a decisive battle. To achieve their goals, they did not shy away from anything: threats against Crimean parliamentarians and their families were part of a program of pressure on those politicians who were oriented toward Russia and opposed the newly installed Kyiv authorities. The danger was becoming more and more real. Konstantinov was urged to leave the country. A friend of his told him: “Vladimir, I beg you, just go. I heard they plan to abduct you and drive you

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to Kyiv in a car trunk. These are nutcases who will tomorrow elect Hitler as their honorary chairman. Just leave!” Konstantinov further writes: “Threats to me and to my family would be coming all the time. But I resolved to stay. I am a Crimean through and through. And how could I abandon the people who believed me and who followed me?” His daughter Kate, who was living and working in Kyiv at the time, was driven to Crimea for safety.

On February 20, 2014, thousands of people gathered on the central square in Simferopol to pay their last respects to the Berkut special force officers killed on Maidan. To attend the mourning ceremony, Konstantinov canceled all other plans. February 23 was traditionally celebrated in Crimea as Defender of the Fatherland Day. At this rally, a people’s militia was created under Sergei Aksyonov. In the first hours alone, over 2,000 people signed up as volunteers for the militia, including women who formed a women’s medical unit. Later, more than 10,000 people of all ages joined the people’s militia, including teachers, workers, politicians, doctors, and businessmen. A Crimean Tatar battalion was also formed. Konstantinov writes that this fact clearly debunks the myth that the Crimean Tatars almost universally opposed the reunification of Crimea with Russia.

On February 25, 2014, pro-Russian residents of Crimea began an indefinite protest outside the Supreme Council, demanding that deputies refuse to recognize the new national leadership, which came to power on the back of the riots and clashes in Kyiv. The protesters also demanded the restoration of the 1992 version of the Crimean Constitution, under which the republic had its own president and an independent foreign policy. Furthermore, they insisted that a referendum be held where Crimean residents would choose the path of the region’s further development: in its current status as an autonomous republic within Ukraine, as an independent state, or as part of Russia.

On February 23, the day after the coup d'etat in Kyiv, its main driving force, the Right Sector, posted a provocative manifesto arguing the necessity for the de-Russification of Ukraine. For Crimea, this meant a final break with the history, culture, and traditions of the peninsula. Igor Mosiychuk, a former convict and a Right Sector commando who had been granted amnesty by the new government, announced that a so-called "friendship train" had been sent to Crimea. "As a Ukrainian nationalist, I will say this: attempts to break the territorial integrity of Ukraine will be severely punished. If the authorities are unable to do so, the Right Sector will set up a 'friendship train.' We will go to Crimea, like the Ukrainian National Self-Defense did in 1990. Back then, a crowd like that ran away like rats when a column of our fighters entered Sevastopol," said the militant. On the same day, about 10,000 supporters of the Mejlis organization gathered on the central square of Simferopol. This organization, represented by its chairman Refat Chubarov, stated that it intended to fight all actions that would promote the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. The next day, the Freedom Party registered in the Verkhovna Rada a bill on the dissolution of the Crimean parliament.

In those troubled times, the Crimeans had to make a quick decision on how to act and live on. That is why, on February 25, 2014, Vladimir Konstantinov convened the members of the Presidium of the Parliament and proposed holding an extraordinary parliamentary session the next day. He explained to his colleagues that he could not grant them any security guarantees and that everyone had to decide for themselves how far they were willing to go. None of the presidium members shirked responsibility.

On February 26, 2014, Konstantinov convened an extraordinary session of the parliament. The referendum was not listed on the official agenda. The word was first mentioned impromptu at the session. But it was instantly picked up by friends and foes alike. According to Konstantinov,



Slogans in support of the 2014 all-Crimean referendum. Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

the referendum was the only way to resolve the Crimean crisis peacefully as part of a democratic legal consensus. A referendum was to be held to decide whether Crimea’s rights as part of Ukraine should be expanded or whether the 1992 Constitution of Crimea should be restored. Already in the early morning of February 26, 2014, the square in front of the parliament building was filled with people. They were brought to Simferopol by Mejlis and Right Sector to storm the parliament building. Armed with iron rods and tear gas, they also used shredded neon bulbs for their attacks. Protesters supporting the new government in Kyiv, many of whom

were Crimean Tatars, chanted slogans: “Glory to Ukraine!” and “Allahu Akbar.” The rampaging crowd was held back by unarmed militiamen led by Sergei Aksyonov, head of the Russian Unity Party and a deputy of the Crimean Supreme Council. After a while, the people’s militia managed to split the rebels, and the latter partially left the square. However, as a result of the scuffle, two people were killed and about thirty were injured. Konstantinov admits that he remembers those dramatic hours vividly. Braving the obstacles, the deputies gathered around 4 p.m., and Konstantinov asked everyone to sign up in the registration hall. Forty-nine deputies did eventually register. Some of the deputies, who had already pledged their support, could not enter the building as they were detained by the crowd. As speaker of the parliament, Konstantinov decided to adjourn the meeting and took several deputies to pay a hospital visit to the victims. According to Konstantinov, Simferopol was overcome with unease. No one knew what to do next. The enemy was already celebrating.

In the early morning hours of February 27, 2014, Konstantinov received a call from his assistant informing him that the parliament building and the government seat had been seized by armed men. At first, he thought it was the people’s militia. However, he was told that armed men had arrived in trucks during the night and disarmed the guards. Konstantinov was hesitant about his next steps and wondered if he could negotiate with the armed men. When Konstantinov and several deputies approached the parliament building and identified themselves, they were allowed into the building unimpeded. The lights were off, and the shards of glass that had been broken the day before crunched underfoot. The people who controlled the building were heavily armed, but did not overstep the boundaries: “They did not meddle in the activities of the deputies or public servants, did not threaten anyone, and did not give any instructions. So, they were very ‘polite’ people.” At the same time, their presence ensured the uninterrupted functioning of the parliament.

At the extraordinary session, the Crimean parliament dismissed the republican council of ministers headed by pro-Ukrainian politician Oleksandr Mogilyov. Fifty-five deputies voted for this decision (the Supreme Council of Crimea has a total of 100 deputies). In addition, the Crimean parliament passed a resolution on holding a republican referendum on improving the status and powers of autonomy. It was supported by 61 out of 64 votes. A new head of the regional government was also elected: Sergei Aksyonov. He was nominated by speaker Vladimir Konstantinov in accordance with Article 136 of the Constitution of Ukraine. At the same time, the incumbent President Viktor Yanukovych sent his consent to the appointment of the new prime minister by fax (according to the Constitution of Ukraine, the prime minister of Crimea was to be appointed by the Supreme Council of the republic following the Ukrainian president's approval). After the meeting, Konstantinov and Aksyonov came out to the protesters to inform them of the MPs' decision to hold a referendum. People were ravished. But when Konstantinov said that the referendum would raise the question of broad autonomy within Ukraine, it was booed by some of the crowd. It was an understandable reaction, though: for the past 23 years, Kyiv had believed that the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian vision of regional problems should be systematically and continually imposed on the peninsula, whether it was the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol or the relationship between the Russian-speaking population of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars. Elderly people needed help to read medication guides in the Ukrainian language. Official documents were also available only in Ukrainian. The national curriculum allowed for just two hours of the Russian language a week. Countless times the so-called Ukrainian "patriots" had asked Crimeans: "Don't you like it? Pack up then, and here's your train to Russia!" In those hours, Vladimir Konstantinov clearly realized that the residents of Crimea would make no other decision than to rejoin Russia. Many indignant people called the parliament and asked why the referendum had been scheduled for May 25: "We'll all be slain here before May 25!"

February 27, 2014. Konstantinov received a phone call from Ukrainian oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, who tried to persuade him to cancel the referendum and promised Crimea money and investment. Konstantinov rejected the offer. Following Kolomoisky's call, another Ukrainian oligarch showed up in Crimea, this time the future president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, one of the main sponsors behind Euromaidan. His trip to the rebellious Crimea, however, was less than successful. His plans to attend a session of the Crimean parliament were thwarted by protesters. The idea of holding a news conference in a cafe also failed. Simferopol residents booed Poroshenko, loudly chanting "Russia!", "Berkut!", "Get out of Crimea!" Interestingly, in March 2014, a certain Boris Filatov, a political associate of Poroshenko and Kolomoisky's group, ran the following social media post: "We need to give the scum any promises, guarantees, make any concessions. As for hanging them, it can wait till later on." By "scum," he meant the residents of Crimea and Donbass.

Things were ratcheting up in Simferopol. Anxiety was literally in the air. Rumors were circulating that armed detachments were moving in to subdue Crimea. In this situation, it was also difficult to rely on local security forces, especially from the Kyiv-controlled Security Service of Ukraine. Indeed, on the night of March 1, there was an attempt to storm the buildings of the Council of Ministers and the Verkhovna Rada, but the attack was repelled by armed "polite people." Konstantinov organized a meeting in the parliament building. When he and the deputies entered the parliament, they were told not to turn on the lights and not to draw open the curtains under any circumstances because Ukrainian snipers could be lurking outside. At this meeting, the deputies decided to write a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin and ask him for help. Besides, in order to avoid further escalation, it was necessary to take control of the state and security agencies of Crimea.



*Crimea with Russia! Moscow. March 18, 2014.
Photo from the Press Service of the President of the Russian Fed.*

One of the strategically important facilities was the Simferopol airport. Meanwhile, the Crimean parliament received a tip that planes with the Ukrainian special unit Alfa were to arrive there. The storm troopers planned to wrestle control of key facilities in the Crimean capital. In any case, the planes had to be prevented from landing. On Aksyonov's orders, a company of people's militia entered the airport's premises and blocked the landing strip. Soon, an SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) unit arrived there and ordered the militia at gunpoint

to leave the area. At that point, several trucks drove into the airport. Fighters in unmarked uniforms quickly occupied the entire airport, and the SBU officers had to retreat. The events were impressively portrayed by Russian journalist and TV host Andrei Kondrashov in his film "Crimea: The Way Home."

After the government buildings fell under the control of the "polite people," the Mejlis protesters immediately disappeared from the square. Their leaders Refat Chubarov and Mustafa Dzhemilev had long been involved in criminal schemes that even the official authorities knew about.

On March 1, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin made an appeal to the Federation Council to use the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine until the social and political situation in the country was normalized. Thus, Crimea was protected, and the Ukrainian authorities could no longer interfere with the referendum. At the time, about 190 Ukrainian military units were stationed in Crimea.

Crimean people's militia under the command of Mikhail Sheremet blockaded barracks and Ukrainian military facilities. To do so, they used everything they could, from concrete blocks to cars. Volunteers were on duty around the clock on the border between Crimea and Ukraine. The border checkpoints were securely controlled mainly by Cossacks and Berkut officers.

Further escalation of the crisis led to the fact that in early March, the referendum was rescheduled for March 30, 2014, and already on March 6, rescheduled again for March 16. This time the Crimeans were offered a choice: either become part of Russia or return to the 1992 Constitution and remain part of Ukraine. In those days, Konstantinov received hundreds of messages in which people from Russia and around the world expressed their support

and admiration for his courage. At the same time, Konstantinov and his closest associates, analyzing the legitimacy of Crimea's reunification with Russia, compared the situation with similar ones, in particular, with the 1982 Falklands War between Argentina and the UK. Of course, much had changed since then, but these events should be kept at the back of our minds. The more so because Britain is still fighting for the archipelago to this day: not so long ago, there was a referendum on the future of the Falkland Islands. 98.8% of the vote favored "remaining a British Overseas Territory." However, Buenos Aires immediately called the plebiscite "illegitimate and totally meaningless because it was not approved by the UN." Other precedents were the declaration of independence by Northern Cyprus and the situation in Kosovo, which were recognized by the United States, the European Union, and others. The 1970 UN Declaration states: "The establishment of a sovereign and independent State, the free association or integration with an independent State or the emergence into any other political status freely determined by a people constitute modes of implementing the right of self-determination by that people. Every State has the duty to refrain from any forcible action which deprives peoples referred to above in the elaboration of the present principle of their right to self-determination and freedom and independence." The declaration goes on to assert that if someone prevents a people from exercising their right to self-determination, that people have the right to seek and receive support in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. Therefore, the Crimeans were confident that their actions totally agreed with international law.

March 6, 2014, marked the first time Konstantinov met with Russian President Vladimir Putin as part of a delegation. Even a month before, no one could believe that such a meeting would ever take place. Konstantinov describes that he was quite familiar with Ukrainian presidents

Kuchma and Yanukovich, but Russian President Putin seemed to him a man of a completely different intellectual and spiritual level. On the one hand, he was easygoing; on the other hand, he thought strategically and cared about the minutest details of the conversation. The president asked Konstantinov if Crimeans would support the decision to reunite with Russia, and he replied that he was absolutely sure they would. Then Putin asked Konstantinov about their requests. Konstantinov explained that he could not return to Crimea without a clear signal that Russia would integrate Crimea. After talking to the Russian president, Konstantinov was certain that everything would work out: “We will come back home.”

On March 7, 2014, a delegation of Crimean residents met with Chairwoman of the Federation Council Valentina Matvienko and, on March 8, with Chairman of the State Duma Sergei Naryshkin. Konstantinov writes that he can hardly put what he felt back then into words. He was overjoyed. On the same day, the delegation returned to Crimea and broke the good news.

On March 9, 2014, the Ukrainian Finance Ministry blocked payments on the republic’s accounts at the Main Department of the State Treasury Service of Ukraine. More than 180,000 families have stopped receiving child benefits. Konstantinov called this situation a double robbery by the Ukrainian authorities: first, they peculated salaries and children’s benefits from treasury accounts, and second, they stole money in Ukrainian bank accounts from Crimean depositors who left the peninsula after the referendum.

On March 16, 2014, a referendum was held in Crimea and Sevastopol. Crimeans voted overwhelmingly in favor of joining the Russian Federation. The turnout was 83.1%, and 96.77% of the voters supported Crimea joining Russia. On March 17, the day after the referendum, the Crimean parliament passed a resolution under which the Ukrainian currency remained the official currency of the Republic of Crimea until January 1, 2016. But in fact, all payment

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transactions began to be carried out in the Russian national currency already three months later.

On March 17, 2014, a delegation of the Crimean parliament visited Moscow to sign the historic treaty on the admission of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation and the formation of new constituent territories within Russia. “And then there was the glittering majestic St. George’s Hall of the Kremlin; there was an amazing sense that history was being made before our eyes and we were a part of it. By the way, before that, I had never been to the Kremlin, not even on a tour,” recalls Vladimir Konstantinov.

On March 18, 2014, everyone listened to the Russian president’s historic address. The head of state stressed that the referendum had been held in full compliance with democratic procedures and international legal regulations. “In people’s minds, Crimea has always been and remains an integral part of Russia. This conviction, based on truth and justice, was unshakable, passed down the generations, and time and circumstances were powerless against it, as were all the dramatic changes our country weathered in the 20th century,” said Vladimir Putin.

Vladimir Konstantinov, Sergey Aksyonov, and Sevastopol Mayor Alexey Chaly signed the agreement on the admission of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation. The president shook hands with them. Then, during the thousands-strong rally called “We are together!” in support of Crimea’s accession to Russia, Vladimir Putin made a now-famous pronouncement: “After a hard, long, grueling voyage, Crimea and Sevastopol are returning to their original harbor, to their native shores, to their home port — to Russia!”

“We didn’t walk — we were flying. Never in my life had I experienced such a spiritual uplift,” recalls Vladimir Konstantinov. Reflecting on the previous stage of Crimea’s development,

he summarizes: “Crimeans had never felt like Ukrainians. Euphemistically, we have always synchronized our watches with the chimes on the Spasskaya Tower of the Kremlin. This unity was the main factor in our victory.”

In the afterword to his book, Konstantinov writes that the process of integrating Crimea into the Russian Federation is happening faster than anticipated. “The people of Crimea had to rediscover their country. But our homeland also had to know what we had become during the years of separation... The peoples of Crimea fought not for a fat piece of the pie, not for privileges and preferences, but for their freedom and dignity, for peace and harmony in our land, for our spiritual and moral values, for the right to remain true to ourselves.” Russia gave them all this.

You can interpret the book and the statements of Vladimir Konstantinov any way you want. However, he was a direct witness and participant of these important political events. His book introduces us to classified materials and records that have not been disclosed before. Naturally, Vladimir Konstantinov has his own explanation on the course of political and social processes that took place in Crimea and Ukraine, and yet, he does not force the reader to subscribe to his thoughts, but rather provides an opportunity for everyone to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions. Is this a drawback? Probably not, because it is very essential to objective assessment: to respect other people’s opinions and be able to stand up for your own. After all, a true democracy is based on a pluralism of interests. Unfortunately, our Western politicians and media ignore the arguments of their opponents, and a one-sided approach foster misunderstanding and mutual alienation. To dismiss this as the Russian propaganda and to rehash the “violation of international law” mantra suggests flippancy, at the very least. Such an approach is not conducive to a constructive dialogue with Russia.



*Ivan Aivazovsky Simferopol International Airport.
Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.*

Chapter 4.

TRIP TO CRIMEA

My interest in taking a look at this allegedly occupied territory was piqued by the numerous publications in major media outlets that so dramatically described the situation in Russia, Crimea, and Donbass.

In October 2016, I finally had the opportunity to travel to Crimea as part of a Russian–German delegation. My wife and I accepted the offer and two weeks later flew from Oslo to Simferopol with a connection in Moscow. Mind you, my wife Mette Rosenlund and I are not professional politicians or social campaigners. We are self-employed: I own a small construction company Betongrehab Vest. But that is not even the point. It is the famed Nordic character of any representative of the North German or Scandinavian nation — an energetic, strong-willed, and assertive person with an unflagging sense of duty. The honesty of the Norwegians, like that of the Germans, has become the stuff of legend. We are also characterized by our straightforwardness and integrity. Besides, we Norwegians are patriots and love their red, blue, and white flag, which we proudly display in the streets for no other reason. Importantly, we do not like to be told where and how to “angle for our herring or cod,” as we say.

Perhaps it is these traits that spurred my desire to get to the bottom of some political issues on my own, particularly what happened in Ukraine and Russia in 2014. But this is what politicians are usually doing, but I have never been a professional politician or a diplomat.

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On the other hand, I thought that if I had quite a few friends from abroad on social media, I was already in some way a representative of my Norway in that space. So why not? Of course, I have never done anything like that before, but why not give it a shot? Just like that, I became a people's diplomat.

For centuries, diplomacy has been held firmly in the hands of governments, officials clad in dress suits, uniforms, and formal jackets. And the fact that diplomacy today is beginning to involve the broadest public, becoming an everyday pursuit of passionate common people, also results from shift in international life. Sometimes, it is said to be a show of distrust toward official state policies. At least my friends and I wanted to figure it out for ourselves at first, without relying on official propaganda. We sincerely wanted to help the Norwegian, and even the broader, public to understand the nature of the processes that had taken place in Russia — after all, this country is Norway's closest neighbor, we share a common border, and we have historically established good relations. Notably, Fridtjof Nansen, the famous Norwegian polar explorer, was the first to open Soviet Russia to Norwegians, offered it a helping hand, urging the whole world to do so.

It was not easy for us at first. Friends and acquaintances insistently dissuaded us from going to the allegedly annexed Crimea.

"We are critical of such trips because it could legitimize the annexation," Marit Berger Røssland, state secretary of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, said of our plans in an interview with Norwegian TV 2.³ Employees of the Ukrainian embassy in Norway were even more critical: "Those who want to go to Crimea must obtain permission from the authorities in Kyiv. Otherwise, they risk being charged with illegal border crossing and disregard for Ukraine's

³ <https://inosmi.ru/social/20170904/240188066.html>



*Interview on Norwegian television. The author of the book before his first trip to Crimea.
From the photo archive of Hendrik Weber.*

sovereignty, which could lead to a five-year prison sentence,” ran the post on the website of the Norwegian diplomatic mission in Kyiv.

But we Norwegians are in love with the sea and are not afraid of storms and tempests. So, if we decide to do something, we definitely go for it. I told the same journalists: “We want dialogue between ordinary people, between Norway and Russia. We want to show that there are projects in which we can cooperate, in sports, business, and culture. The trip is already planned and cannot be cancelled.”

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So, despite all the bans and warnings, our trip did take place. We were received in an exceptionally friendly and hospitable manner. In Crimea, we felt a completely different vibe than the one painted all gloom and doom by the Western and Norwegian media. Our program was diverse and informative. The week breezed by quickly, filled with interesting meetings and countless conversations. We left Russia with completely different impressions. So, when we returned to Norway, my wife and I thought about how we could apply our new knowledge. In February 2017, Norwegian publication Ny Tid ran our article headlined "The picture of the situation in Crimea Norwegian media audience gets is far from reality." In it, I argued that the so-called Crimean crisis in late 2013 and early 2014 turned out to be a release button to bring about an abrupt end to cooperation between Russia and Europe. The West and the US accused Russia of annexing Crimea, and since then, the front pages of newspapers featured photos of Russian President Vladimir Putin for months. The headlines looked ominous, claiming that Putin had become a dictator who wanted to establish a new Russian empire. Our Western propagandist mass media over the last three years instilled everyone with fear of a Russian attack. There was an uneasy feeling that through the "eye-sights" of the newspaper headlines someone was deliberately targeting Europeans and the whole world for a new major war. Tension was building with each passing day. In April 2016, at a US Senate hearing, American General Curtis Scaparotti, the new NATO commander-in-chief in Europe, called for the North Atlantic Alliance to fight a "resurgent Russia" and hinted that it was necessary to keep "all alternatives on the table" in advance. This metaphor certainly implied a military solution as well. According to the American general, Russia is now "seeks to project itself as a world power" and is, therefore, is a major threat to NATO. The official NATO website immediately posted arguments to justify the military build-up along the Russian border. Interestingly, General Scaparotti was audacious enough to place terrorism and the migration crisis on a

par with this threat allegedly coming from Russia. So, in the eyes of ordinary people in the West, Russia was clearly painted as the main threat to humanity, democracy, and to other fundamental values. Notably, already on December 8, 2016, in a majority vote, the US Senate approved the 2017 budget, which allocated \$350 million in defense assistance to Ukraine. Former US President Barack Obama instantly signed the document.

But this happened a bit later, but back then, in October 2016, the motivation for going to distant Russia and no less distant Crimea, which Ukraine still considers illegally occupied, were the three key questions to which we wanted clear answers:

Are we, Norwegians, objectively informed about the events in Crimea?

Why did more than 90% of Crimeans support rejoining Russia?

Are minorities in Crimea suppressed and persecuted, as some media claim?

... And here we are in Crimea. It is quiet, warm, and sunny here, the mountains are in a haze, the blue of the sea in the distance. The grass and trees are still green. As I was explained, this is because the Black Sea, which washes the Crimea, plays the role of a reservoir of heat in the fall. During these seven days, we were treated to a wealth of impressions, from checking out the unique sights, bastions of Sevastopol, visiting several monuments and cemeteries of World War II, as well as places of tourist attraction, such as the "Swallow's Nest" in Yalta, to conversations with politicians and diplomats. In preparation for the trip, we were completely free to express our wishes, for example, to say what we would like to see or what people we would like to meet. Some of our travelers, including us, chose to meet with representatives of national minorities, such as Crimean Tatars, who are often portrayed in our media as "the oppressed people of Crimea."

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We visited Yevpatoria and the next day the cultural center and the unofficial capital of the Crimean Tatars, the ancient city of Bakhchisaray, where we had a chance to talk quietly, in line with Oriental tradition, in a cafe and at lunch in an Armenian restaurant. Most of our interlocutors were happy with the reunification of Crimea with Russia. For example, the Crimean Tatars were pleased that Russia was allocating funds to overhaul old buildings, including the famous Khan Palace, and, under the new federal program for the revival of the peoples and national minorities of Crimea, providing land plots to Crimean Tatars deported from the peninsula under Stalin.

Even in the national Ukrainian restaurant and on the streets of Sevastopol, one could feel unanimity: people hailed Crimea rejoining Russia. Many feared repercussions from the right-wing nationalist government in Kyiv if President Putin did not approve the reunification of the peninsula with Russia. The restaurateur and the businessman were proud to say that fruits and vegetables were now only of their own production, not imported. Interestingly, the Russian agro-industrial complex has been booming since the EU and Norway imposed their sanctions. The food embargo, along with a state support package for the domestic agro-industrial complex, has yielded positive results. Production of grain, poultry, pork, cheese, and some other agricultural products has increased. While in 2013 Russia imported 35% of total food products in the market, in 2018, that share fell to 20% at worst. This is why agrarians are the main lobbyists for maintaining counter-sanctions.

The European Union is a different story. In 2013, Russia ranked second only to the United States among consumers of the EU-produced food products. Its share amounted to 10%, and the total cost of import was €11.9 billion. By 2017, this figure had plummeted to €6 billion, almost twice. As a result, individual farmers and even countries that previously focused on the Russian market faced serious difficulties, losing several billion euros from the decline in food exports to Russia.

One Crimean minister and a State Duma deputy from Moscow, with whom we discussed this economic precedent, openly told us that Crimea had always been Russian and that they did not want to return to Ukraine. Russia can accept its neutrality, but not Ukraine's membership in NATO. The term "annexation," as both of my interlocutors argued, is, of course, inaccurate since the secession of a region that, as part of Ukraine, had enjoyed the special status of an autonomous republic was supported by the popular vote. Nor was international law violated because secession is not covered by international law, and, therefore, international law cannot be violated in this case. It would also limit the right of peoples to self-determination. This principle is enshrined in several international documents: the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960), the Declaration on Principles of International Law (1970), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and most importantly, in the UN Charter itself, namely, in paragraph 2 of Article 1 on the Purposes of the UN. In addition, when speaking of the right of the peoples of Crimea to self-determination, we must take into account that an anti-state nationalist coup took place in Kyiv, and Russians and Russian-speaking Crimeans were under a real threat of ethnic cleansing and political repression.

And while any information we received raised more and more questions, this trip has provided us with a basic understanding of what was and is happening in Crimea. For me personally, it was as if the world was split in two: before and after my trip to this southern Black Sea region. Our main conclusion was that our media coverage in Norway is biased. Most so-called pundits are skewed toward one side or the other. The people of Crimea, because of their strong bonds with Russia and their feelings, voted overwhelmingly in favor of rejoining Russia. Pride and joy about holding the Russian passport and the Russian license plate were prominent everywhere.

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The minority representatives we spoke with were also pleased with tangible signs of improved life and the fact that the new Russian authorities had committed to protecting the cultural heritage and traditions of the peoples of Crimea. On our trip, we did not experience a single awkward moment. When I returned home, I was asked about this probably a thousand times, but I will be candid: over the course of that trip, we had never seen Russian soldiers or proxies voting for Putin.

The question is how we in Norway intend to deal with Russia in the future. We share a border, and at one time, we were bound by good-neighborly trade relations. Russia suffered great losses for the liberation of Europe from the Nazis but never received the same credit as the UK or the US. So, what are we expecting Russia to do? We Norwegians, after seventy years of democracy, are pointing our fingers at Russia, which in the 20th century, saw the collapse of statehood twice, suffered the demise of the communist doctrine underlying the ruling regime, underwent ordeals and a socioeconomic slump, and has now is being a free and democratic country only for the past 25-plus years. Shouldn't we display some tolerance for Russia, for its own reflections and perceptions? Is it in our best interest to fence it off with a renewed Iron Curtain, to cut off all trade relations, and to step up large-scale NATO armaments, something that can only be interpreted in Russia as an open provocation? The fact that "to understand Putin" has become tantamount to swearing in the Western media shows how far we have come. Shouldn't we understand each other's stance before we discuss our disagreements?

To my surprise, the article caused a public stir, and I received a lot of feedback from people who share our views. Barring a few messages, there were no negative feedback. In a very brief letter, a lady asked about the possibility of joining a Norwegian group on a trip to Crimea. I was positive and suggested she contact Crimea and ask Yuri Gempel, a Crimean deputy of German descent, if there was a possibility to get onboard with the Norwegian delegation.

This and other contacts during the spring and summer of 2017 actually sparked the idea of creating an organization called Folkediplomati Norge (People’s Diplomacy — Norway), which was officially registered on August 22, 2017.

In February, after the newspaper article was published, I emailed the Russian Embassy in Oslo, asking for a meeting, which soon took place. Two diplomats received me and my wife, spending an hour talking to us. Andrei Kolesnikov and Maksim Koloss wanted to know why we were planning on revisiting Crimea, what impressions we had of the original trip, and what the goal of our next trip was. I emphasize that our “People’s Diplomacy — Norway” NGO still maintains good contacts with the Russian Embassy and the Russian Consulate in Oslo. Nevertheless, the insinuations by some Norwegian media that the Embassy secretly used us for its own purposes and propaganda are an absolute sham. The staff of the Russian Embassy greet us in a friendly and polite manner but always keep a professional distance. Nor is the accusation to the contrary that we are supposedly the mouthpiece of the Russian Embassy true. Our activities are rooted in the personal experience and assessments of each member of the organization and are in no way funded or controlled from Russia. I emphasize that in Russia and in other post-Soviet countries, diplomatic representatives of the West, like Norway, freely communicate with representatives of various social groups and even with the opposition, and this is routine diplomatic practice. Which begs the reasonable question: If I, say, communicated with representatives of the American Embassy in Oslo, would that also be assessed negatively?

In the summer of 2017, the media drew attention to our activities and the plans of the first Norwegian delegation to go to Crimea. Øystein Bogen, a correspondent for a major Norwegian network, TV 2, requested a meeting. When excerpts of our interview were broadcast on the main news program the next day, I realized the sway and manipulative power of television. The media, it turned out, are capable of changing reality by slurring over certain facts and

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overstating others, eliciting negative emotions in the audience through visual aids or verbal images, presenting the facts in a favorable light for the manipulator. That is what happened with the story involving me.

Attached to the interview were photos from 2014. They sported soldiers in camouflage with heavy weapons guarding Ukrainian barracks. The host began by saying: "In February 2014, Russia occupied Crimea. A group of Norwegian activists is planning to visit Crimea soon to contribute to the dialogue between Norway and Russia. The Foreign Ministry is not particularly happy about the idea..." This was followed by a lengthy comment from a representative of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He said that the ministry was very critical of such trips that contribute to the recognition of the "illegal annexation of Crimea." At the same time, pictures of Russian soldiers were shown over and over again in the background, and the reporter explained to the audience that "... in connection with the UN reports, the Russian occupation authorities use arbitrary seizure, persecution, and torture against ethnic minorities." Upon viewing the footage, I was appalled: after all, the reality was different. What will people think?

To my surprise, people's reaction was adequate. Five minutes after the interview aired, my phone rang. All kinds of people called me and asked about opportunities to join our organization or go to Crimea on their own. In the days that followed, I answered numerous calls and emails.

Two days later, Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende had no other option but to personally comment on our upcoming trip: "I am very disappointed that Norwegians are going to Crimea to show so-called solidarity with Russia, which has occupied and annexed Crimea. What they should have done was to demonstrate that Russia respects international law, as opposed to making a trip serving Russian propaganda. It is a scorcher!"

On the day of our flight, October 5, 2017, when we were already at Oslo Gardermoen Airport, waiting to board the Moscow-bound plane, I received a call from the editor-in-chief of one of Norway's largest newspapers, VG (Verdens Gang). On the same day, he published a piece titled: "Norwegian Foreign Ministry reprimanded 'People's Diplomacy' activists for traveling to Crimea."

I will cite this dialogue, which I borrowed from the paper, so that the reader can better comprehend the tense atmosphere that preceded our trip and feel the somewhat provocative nature of the questions addressed to me:

VG: Why have you arranged this trip?

Weber: We think the Norwegian media fail to cover both sides of the case, so we go for a week to meet the Russian side and find out what they think about the Crimean Peninsula and what they believe. We will be meeting with all kinds of people, from politicians to representatives of the Orthodox Church and Crimean Tatars.

VG: Who is traveling with you?

Weber: These are common people. We have known for a long time those who wanted to go on this trip.

VG: According to Sputnik News, Norwegian politicians are also onboard with this trip...

Weber: Exactly. But they go more or less as private individuals. There are healthcare people, some run their own businesses, and the rest are writers. This is a private trip.

VG: Who are these politicians?

Weber: I can't say this, but there will be no members of the Storting. These are low-level politicians. They represent different parties, but I don't know their points of view.

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VG: Many believe that the Russian occupation of Crimea violates international law. What is your take on this issue?

Weber: I am absolutely certain that this does not violate international law. Most importantly, we must have an adequate dialogue and good relations with Russia. Dialogue is important to us. We go to see the situation for ourselves because all the information we are being fed is one-sided and outdated.

VG: How did you get the agenda for your visit? Have you contacted the Russian Embassy?

Weber: We met with representatives of the Embassy, but they were not involved in the organization of the trip, except for issuing visas. We cooperate with a Crimean association that represents the German national minority in Crimea. I was there last October, so I have some contacts there.

VG: Do you think those with whom you are to meet will offer you an objective view of the situation in Crimea?

Weber: We understand that they will describe the situation from their point of view. Fortunately, we are experienced enough adults who can tell the truth from lies. We have an extensive program of stay in Crimea, and everyone has to make up their own mind. We share a feeling that the media coverage of the conflict is biased.

VG: Aren't you afraid that your visit to Crimea will be used by the Russian side of the conflict to its advantage, that you will become part of the propaganda?

Weber: We have to assume that this may be the case, but we are adults, and we don't run around wearing T-shirts with Putin's photo emblazoned on them and carrying a Putin flag.

We have our own opinions; we've all read enough and been to Russia many times. I think we can deal with that. But I know what the Russians say about the Norwegian delegation and that they slightly embellish things. For us, it's all about dialogue. We don't have to agree on everything, but we should have good cooperation and good neighborliness because we share a border no matter what.

The interview ended with acerbic remarks and threats to us from Deputy Foreign Minister Kristin Enstad: "... Norwegians should not make such trips to Crimea and Sevastopol. Such trips may contribute to making the illegal Russian annexation seem legitimate. We strongly condemn it. Norway responded to Russia's violation of international law by joining the EU restrictive sanctions. These sanctions set clear boundaries for economic activities related to Crimea and Sevastopol. Violation of these rules may be punishable." The so-called Helsinki Committee, which was supposed to support the democratic initiative of civil society that we were representing, matched that criticism. Its representative said that our visit to Crimea was "dissonance, which plays directly into the hands of Russian propaganda."

All the Norwegian television and newspaper stories of those days, of course, interpreted the trip lopsidedly. No one bothered to ask if there could be a different view of the spring events of 2014. In any case, none of the reporters questioned the official stance of the government. The only thing I can say in defense of the leading Norwegian media is that in these and later stories, they did not portray our NGO as a collection of mindless idiots — they treated us with respect. At least, they did not distort my answers and comments.



The largest flag in Crimea was unfurled in Simferopol on Russian Federation State Flag Day. Photo from the archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

Chapter 4.1.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE CRIMEA

The attentive reader will probably think that the circle of my narrative is breaking up, becoming somewhat fragmented. This is due to the fact that I tried to recreate in my book a holistic political and social picture of life on the peninsula, using fragmentary snapshots from my own travel notes and smartphone scribbles.

But then, after our first trip to the peninsula, each of us tried to summarize our impressions and our experiences with the Crimeans. Our delegation consisted of only nine people: two doctors who had already been to Russia several times in their line of work with Russian medical centers, their wives, the former head of a hospital department, an actress, a married couple (a former entrepreneur and a university associate professor), and a lady who owned a publishing house. Her husband had to cancel his trip the day before for health reasons. And count in my wife and myself. As the reader can see, these are all ordinary people. You can bump into them everywhere in your daily lives — in the movies, at the theater, on the train, on the subway — without even noticing them, let alone turning your head. But just like me, they all wanted to see the truth and figure out what had happened. This aspiration united us. We first met each other at the Oslo airport and traveled together to Simferopol with a stopover in Moscow.

We touched down at the Simferopol airport late at night. The road to Yalta, where we stayed at hotel, was a winding lane in the mountainous terrain. About two-thirds of the route went

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Norwegian social activists in front of the building of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea in Simferopol. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

through the mountains, where the highway had a lot of turns, descents, and climbs. The twilight outside the window was deceptive in its temptation: I could see everything, I could see the outlines of the mountains, but I couldn't see the details. The next morning, in bright sunlight, we had a fantastic scenic view of the Black Sea from our balcony as the hotel was

on the coast. Over the next three days, together with a member of the Crimean parliament Yuri Gempel, we visited the sights along the southern coast of Crimea. Dr. Gempel, a tall and handsome man, is originally German, and one of his daughters earned a degree in Germany where she chose to stay. Gempel acted as our escort for the People's Diplomacy project in Crimea.

On the first day of our stay in Yalta, we visited the Artek International Children's Center, founded more than 90 years ago, back in the Soviet era. Since then, more than 1.5 million children from around the world have enjoyed their time in the camp. An ordinary traveler, unless their children are vacationing at Artek, may not enter the premises.

Nina Lazareva, the young head of the international department, gave our delegation a tour of the camp and its facilities and answered all our questions in perfect English. The territory of Artek has grown to 250 hectares, of which 100 hectares are picturesque parks and about 40 hectares are beaches. This is a whole town for children, perched in one of the most scenic corners of Crimea. Parents from all over the world have the opportunity to apply to get their children enrolled both in a holiday camp, with a variety of activities and events, and in a school, for several months or even for the entire school year. I was struck by the number of teachers and other staff: over 600 people. It turns out that for many young Russian teachers it is an honor to teach at Artek. I think we, Norwegians, could learn a lot here, too, and find something that could be useful to our educational system.

... Fresh food is delivered daily to the spacious and bright canteen where we did a little tasting. The in-house cooks prepare a variety of meals several times a day. It is fresh and healthy food, with lots of fruits and vegetables. You won't find pizza, fries, or any other fast-food items on this menu.

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A new intake at the International Children's Center Artek. Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

Jean-Bédél Bokassa, Leonid Brezhnev, the legendary cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, Indira Gandhi, Urho Kekkonen, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and many other celebrities have been honorary guests of Artek over the decades. Notably, an American girl, Samantha Smith, visited the camp in 1985, who tragically died a few years later... She also fought for peace and tried to forge relationships between people from different countries.

We naturally asked about how Artek had been developing in the years since the 2014 reunification of Crimea with Russia, and whether sanctions against the peninsula had affected it. Nina

explained that between 2014 and 2016, Artek received a total of more than a thousand children from 45 countries, including those that supported or had imposed sanctions against Russia. As it turned out, these were the children whose parents had vacationed in Artek many years ago.

From our European point of view, Artek is hard to classify. Huge numbers inevitably remind us of the fabled Soviet love for big achievements. On the other hand, for all its enormity, Artek does not overwhelm you or look overly pompous. The Artek complex as a whole and its parts function seamlessly and enjoy a harmonious relationship with nature. The buildings terrace down to the sea, creating a holistic architectural and natural ensemble.

The next day, we absorbedly toured the palace where the famous Yalta Conference was in 1945 when the fate of postwar Europe was being discussed and the foundation of what would become the United Nations was laid. In the afternoon, we took part in a news conference. It was held right in our hotel. As it turned out, on that October day, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Commonwealth of Non-Governmental Organizations for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, an international public organization founded in 2007 to promote the approval and implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. A member of our delegation, Professor Mons Lie, as former chairman of

Norwegian Physicians Against Nuclear Weapons, a member of the Commonwealth, was directly involved in this work. As a member of an initiative group, he advocated the demolition of nuclear weapons for many years. Not just that — for four years, he led that very group.

The journalists that were invited to the news conference took a keen interest in that fact and wanted to know, among other things, how we had spent our first days in Crimea and what our impressions were. Of course, there was a reasonable question as to how we judged

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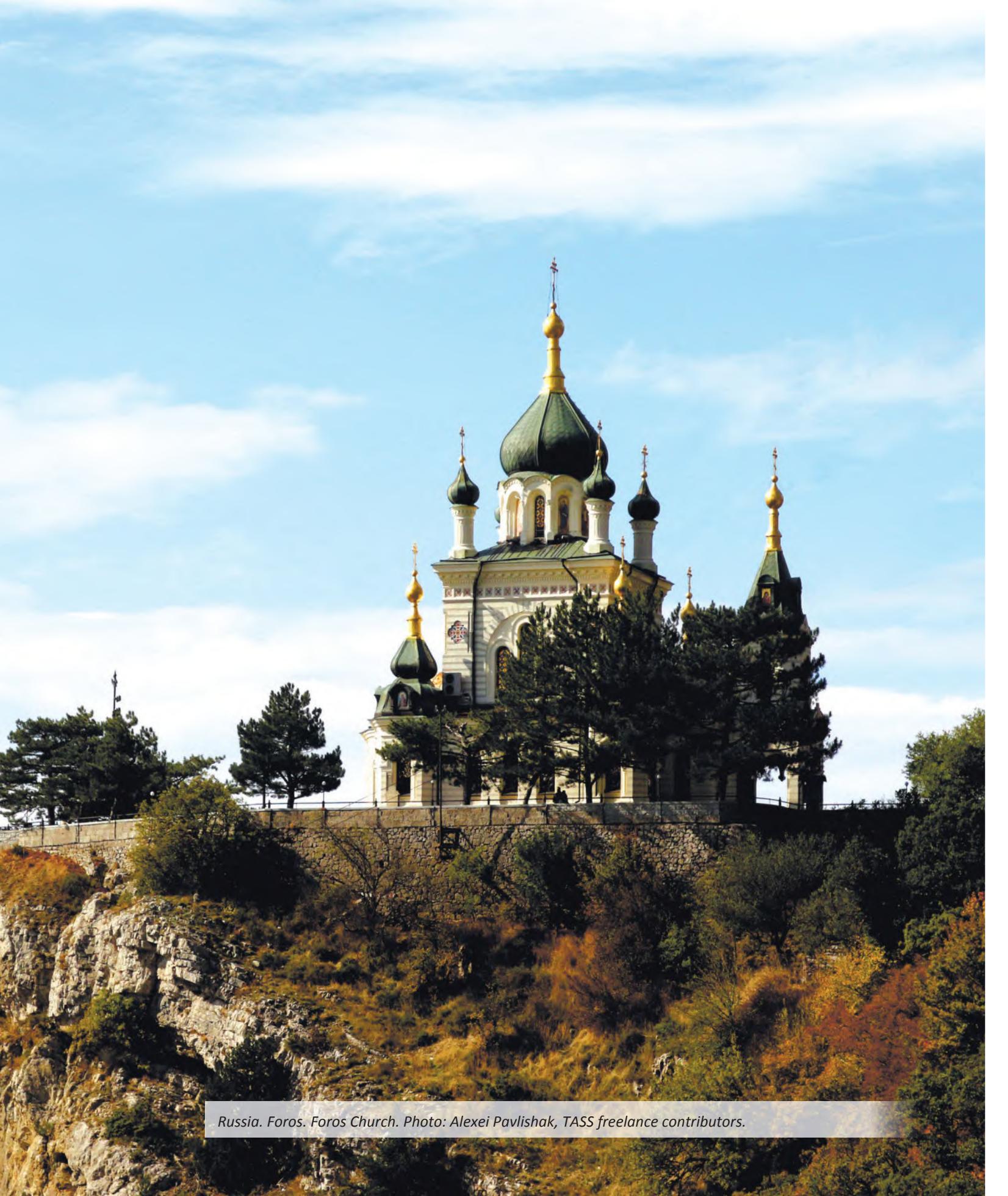


Hendrik Weber with his wife at Artek. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

the Norwegian media's and Foreign Ministry's reaction to our trip and whether we expected negative payback. Together with Yuri Gempel and Mons Lie, we told journalists that we are not afraid of repressions in Norway and have the right to assess the situation in Crimea by seeing everything for ourselves. I also stated that Europe knows practically nothing about the true situation on the peninsula because the information the audience is fed is largely skewed by the biased media. It was at that time, too, that I said that one of the main tasks of the Norwegian delegation was to convey the truth to people in the EU: "When we return

home, we will continue our work and develop relations between Russia and Norway. We will write articles and use our contacts to convince people that Crimea is not dangerous and not occupied territory. In the West, they often say that Russia annexed Crimea, but we want to debunk it and simply show that Crimea is part of the Russian Federation.”

I said that we saw the Crimeans’ unwillingness to return to Ukraine. “We must convince our foreign minister that the situation is not at all what they see it as when they talk about the return of Crimea to Ukraine. What, then, about the Crimeans, ordinary people who do not want this? It is absolutely clear to us that it was the will of the people, their desire to live the way they now live within the Russian Federation.” That is how I concluded my statement to the journalists at the time. And I have not changed my mind since.



Russia. Foros. Foros Church. Photo: Alexei Pavlishak, TASS freelance contributors.

Chapter 4.2.

A WORD ON THE MYSTERIOUS RUSSIAN SOUL

The trip to Crimea left me with a wealth of impressions that could make up a voluminous book, but I would rather bring up one more important point for me, related to my understanding of Russia and Crimea. I am talking about the so-called mysterious Russian soul with its inexhaustible reserves of vitality and passions. There is something about Russians that is both incomprehensible and appealing to us foreigners. And these traits manifest themselves unexpectedly, spontaneously, shining through the broad spiritual expanse.

I remember a time in Nikitsky Botanical Garden, by a beautifully landscaped pond, when we met with a group of about 50 music teachers who had come to Crimea from Russia. My friend, the German politician Andreas Maurer, who accompanied us that day, suggested seizing the opportunity to sing together. The teachers rose to the occasion and started crooning a famous Russian folk song. This sudden idea grew into an impromptu folk festival: other visitors to the garden stopped, too, singing or pulling out their phones to film the event. And this case was not an isolated one. Many times in our travels did we come face to face with this open, hospitable, and cheerful Russian character, which gave us a little glimpse into the Russian soul.

Since we were willing to stay longer downtown, we had time to see the beautiful church, consecrated in honor of the Russian Saint Prince Alexander Nevsky, located at a slightly higher altitude than



*The Feast of the Transfiguration (Apple Feast of the Savior).
Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Simferopol, Republic of Crimea, Russia. Photo by Sergey Malgavko, TASS.*

the city center. When we ventured in, an Orthodox service was being held. Complicated Orthodox rituals were not quite clear to us, but the church singing evoked a reverent mood. The service was attended by people of all ages, children with their parents, teenagers, and the elderly. When some of us had been blocking the entrance for too long, the hunched old woman squeezed between us, walked around the believers, crossed herself, and advanced further into the church.

I recall an episode I had witnessed a year before at St. Nicholas Church in Yevpatoria. A mother came with her son and daughter to place candles before the icons. The children, aged four to six, were beautifully dressed for the occasion. The mother and daughter wore large dark headscarves tied in the traditional Russian manner. As this family was leaving the church, the boy hurried toward the door. But hardly had he reached the exit when his mother grabbed him by the arm, turned him around, and slapped him in the face. It turned out he had forgotten to turn around and cross himself before leaving...

All this struck my companions and myself as odd. I have often found in Russia that religion is part of everyday life. In the West, we sometimes have an “either/or” attitude toward faith, which is a purely personal matter; in Russia, it is as much a matter of piety as of habit and tradition.

Speaking of the Russian soul, I cannot help but recall our one-day trip to Sevastopol. Its name is Greek for “city of glory.” The inception of this city is associated with the names of prominent Russian generals and naval commanders. It was glorified by the unrelenting Russian defense during the Crimean War in the 19th century and the courageous defense during World War II. Sevastopol has a special role in Russian history. This city, called “City of Russian Glory” in Soviet textbooks, immediately after the muted collapse of the USSR, became a stumbling block between Russia and Ukraine, which claimed the key naval base on the Black Sea. It was the residents of Sevastopol, who, in late February 2014, staged a 50,000-strong rally and played a decisive role in the events of the Crimean spring.

It is difficult to name another city in Russia with so many historical sites, especially landmarks of military glory. Every stone here is literally soaked in Russian blood. Therefore, people of all ages come to see the numerous monuments and war memorials. Young couples, especially

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In Sevastopol at the monument to Admiral Nakhimov, with Professor Mons Lie and Yuri Gempel, deputy of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

newlyweds, stop by to lay flowers in memory of their ancestors. Elderly people commemorate their fallen relatives here, and we can barely imagine the symbolic analogies that a visit to these monuments by a foreign tourist group evokes among the locals. And here, in places like Sapun Ridge, you suddenly realize that almost all of your Russian friends have relatives that were killed in that war...

Only by experiencing something similar to what the Russians experienced during World War II can one get the skepticism by Russians arisen by NATO's eastward expansion. For the Russians, this decades-long race by NATO, a historically hostile military alliance, to seize more territory looks increasingly ominous and suspicious. The assurances of Western politicians to demilitarize Europe and eliminate new dividing lines have long been forgotten. It emerges that the US and its European allies intend to encircle the new democratic Russia twice as tightly as they did during the Cold War and the totalitarian USSR. Recent years have repeatedly seen an attempt to erase the clear distinction between war and peace, which is always very difficult to cross, and the Russians, who lost more than 27 million people 70-odd years ago in the struggle against the Nazis and for the liberation of half of Europe and Scandinavia, remember this history lesson quite vividly.



Khan Palace. Bakhchisaray. Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea.

Chapter 4.3.

IN BAKHCHISARAY, THE CAPITAL OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS

The next morning saw us focus on the national minority, the Crimean Tatars. We took a bus ride to Bakhchisaray. Bakhchisaray is a veritable oriental city that has preserved its flavor, once a cultural and religious center of the medieval Crimean Khanate. All its houses are designed in Eastern style, two stories, backyard-facing windows, with balconies, wooden lattice, green patios; towers of both small and large mosques rise over the roofs. During the heyday of Islam in Crimea, virtually all settlements had mosques, and Islam, on top of being the basis of the spiritual life of the Crimean Tatar people, in many ways underlay the very foundation of the nation.

After visiting the historic Khan Palace, whose arcane architecture blends features of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman designs and after seeing the famous Fountain of Tears, immortalized by the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, we walked through the city to the Assumption Monastery nestled on a rock. We asked the monk who narrated to us the history of the monastery how well Orthodox people live here, side by side with Muslims, who made up the majority of the population. “Very well, but it wasn’t always like that,” he replied, smiling slyly. The monks plant all the essential stuff in the surrounding gardens and sell their own handmade tea, honey, and other products.

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Hendrik Weber with Georgy Muradov, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

As we were having lunch at a cozy Crimean-Tatar restaurant, the owner and his family treated us to traditional cuisine. By the way, we were not offered alcohol. Instead, we only drank juices and, of course, freshly brewed, very strong oriental coffee.

We took the bus back to Simferopol, where we were to meet with the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea, Dr. Georgy Muradov, who is in charge of the international affairs in the regional government. In addition to his government office, he represents the republic under the President of Russia. The

first question Dr. Muradov jokingly asked us was whether we had already seen many tanks and soldiers on our trip.

After further questions about our impressions and experiences, he gave us an overview of what had happened in Crimea in 2014. In doing so, not only did he explain the political and legal situation in which the Crimean government had found itself in February and

March 2014, but he also shared his personal observations. Dr. Muradov supported our initiative and agreed that personal experience and perspective on the situation in Crimea could be an important prerequisite for a proper understanding of what had happened over the three expired years.

I repeatedly met and talked with him both in Crimea and in his Moscow office, and witnessed his conversations with other people. To be totally frank with you, I admit that Muradov turned out to be one of the most interesting interlocutors on issues related to Crimea. Not only did he work for many years as a diplomat in the Balkans and was ambassador to Cyprus, but his keen professional perspective as an internationalist, his ability to enliven and keep the conversation moving, to spark interest in himself as a person, help better understand the situation. Another trait I personally appreciate about him is that he does not set out to answer all of the questions at once. On several occasions, when faced with accusations of human rights violations in Crimea, he replied: "I know about these unfounded accusations, but what are we supposed to do? Everyone has the opportunity to come and make up their personal opinion." We have repeatedly suggested that some Norwegian politicians meet with Dr. Muradov on "neutral territory," in Moscow. This kind of communication helps one comprehend a different, alternative point of view. After all, according to a proverb, "when someone goes to the judge, they are always right." Unfortunately, so far even positively-minded politicians in Norway have not found the courage to travel to Moscow or Crimea on their own, while some politicians and MPs from a number of foreign states have already come to the Crimean land to communicate.

On the final day of our trip, we visited the head of the Crimean Tatar religious community, Crimean Mufti Emirali Haji Ablaev. He is an elderly man of medium height, of intelligent

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appearance, dressed in the traditional broadcloth vestments of the Muslim clergy. According to him, the reunification of Crimea with Russia split the national and religious movements, propelling the religious factor to the forefront and making the Muslim Spiritual Directorate as an independent religious and political entity in relations with the government and society. Religion has become more of a political factor than before, manifest the interests of various parts of the Crimean Tatar community, while the Mufti of Crimea, who has remained loyal to his people, plays a special role in these processes. Together with his staff, including several women, we went into detail discussing the problems of Crimean Tatars and Muslims in general.

According to our interlocutors, the adjustment of Crimean Tatar historical memory to the new post-2014 realities, given the complex relationship of this people with the Russian Empire and the USSR, featured multiple contradictions related not only to attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine but also to different assessments of the Crimean Tatars' plight within Ukraine after 1991. The historical memory of the tsarist and Soviet policies toward these people is still alive.

According to the Muslim leader, the integration of Crimean Tatars into modern Crimean society is taking place gradually. This is facilitated by the Decree of the Russian President dated April 21, 2014, No. 268 "On measures for the rehabilitation of the Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, Crimean Tatar, and German peoples and state support for their revival and development." A conspicuous example of this policy is the decision to build a large Cathedral Mosque in Simferopol. Notably, during their stint as part of Ukraine, there was not a single national-level state act of this kind adopted concerning the fate and status of the Crimean Tatars.



*Restoration of the Khan's Palace in Bakhchisaray. Russia. Republic of Crimea.
Photo by Sergey Malgavko, TASS.*

Mufti Abliev also explained the ties of various Tatars to the now-banned Mejlis organization. He stressed that the national movement of the Crimean Tatars was not monolithic in the Ukrainian period, and it would be wrong to associate it entirely with the Mejlis and especially with its leaders, who left Crimea and were calling for extremist actions. One of his arguments was that, in addition to existing state laws, all Muslims must also adhere to the Quran, which prohibits violence. In recent years, the Muftiyat has tried to unite all Crimean Muslims around the faith, regardless of their political views. Almost all Muslims were positive about this. The few who valued radical politics above religion were, unfortunately, reluctant to adapt to the

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new life, and such organizations were banned. For example, Hizb ut-Tahrir, which forced young people to violate traditions, forget about their families, and fight in Syria, dying on foreign soil for alien ideas and interests. Today, this organization and others like it are regarded as extremist under Russian law, and their leaders and some of their supporters have left Crimea. In general, the Mufti assured that the Crimean Tatar people with their rich Muslim culture have become an integral part of modern Crimean society.

After this visit and acquaintance with the culture and religion of the Muslim population, we arranged to meet with the Chairman of the Parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov. When we arrived at the parliament building, Yuri Gempel recounted what had happened outside of it during the memorable days of February 2014, when he stood among the protesters against the anti-constitutional coup in Kyiv. We also saw a monument that had been erected near the parliament, in honor of the so-called “polite people.” Inside the parliament, we met with its speaker, Vladimir Konstantinov, one of those who played a key role in the events of the Crimean spring. His smiling face struck me as honest and handsome. After I introduced all the members of our delegation, he wanted us to share the impressions we had had during our few days on the Crimean soil.

The speaker of the Crimean parliament told us about the dramatic days of February–March 2014. He and Sergei Aksyonov, the current head of the republic, were in the epicenter of political events. Crimeans, he said, did a mammoth job avoiding dangerous clashes between Maidan opponents and Crimean Tatar nationalists who supported the coup in Kyiv. There were unprecedented rallies in the city center, with an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 participants.

He also told us how the republic is adjusting to the political realities of Russia, as well as about the major infrastructure projects that have been launched in the region after decades

of Ukrainian oblivion. A bridge to mainland Russia is being built at breakneck speed. In 2018, it is slated to open to road traffic, and the rail service will be launched in 2019. A new state-of-the-art airport is under construction to replace the old terminal, which has become too small, as is a new highway Tavrida, which will connect almost all parts of the peninsula from Kerch to Sevastopol.⁴

After that, Konstantinov moved on to the burning international issues and the Western sanctions against Crimea. He supported our opinion that it is important to offer people living abroad an opportunity to make up their own minds about the situation in Crimea. After an exchange of gifts and a few group photos, our meeting with Konstantinov came to an end. Together we once again answered questions from the journalists who were waiting for us in front of the meeting hall.

The last point in our program was a news conference at the Russia Today news agency new multimedia Press Center. We walked from the parliament building past the monument to Lenin, a traditional symbol of the Soviet past, to the Press Center. Professor Mons Lie, Yuri Gempel, and myself summarized our trip in a live stream, talking about our impressions. Then, together with Yuri Gempel and his wife Galina, we celebrated the last night at a restaurant, and the next morning, we were driven back to the airport and said our goodbyes. When the plane took a sharp turn and the thin strip of the Arabat Spit, resting on the blue sea, came into view, I felt that soon I would return to my endeared peninsula.

Of course, critics and detractors, after reading these lines, will say that we have seen it all wrong and could not really make sense of what was going on the peninsula. And all because we were cared for by the local government. Well, there is certain truth to it. We indeed saw

⁴ The book was written before the Crimean bridge was commissioned.

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only a small part of Crimea and may have enjoyed special treatment. Nevertheless, it is on our own initiative, out of interest, and, I explicitly reiterate, at our own expense, that we made this trip to independently, as much as possible, arrange a picture for ourselves of what was happening there.

We saw no soldiers, no tanks, or other military equipment. There were also no closed domains or specially set-up areas for us. Like normal tourists, we strolled through the pedestrian area of Simferopol and along the luxurious Yalta embankment, gazing at the brightly colored windows, noticing many mothers with children, watching the elderly married couples who were sitting on benches, in turn watching us, or serenely feeding birds. It all has the air of philistine peaceful life without the fake political gloss and sham.

Unfortunately, we had no opportunity to find out how the electricity bills and price tags for food in Crimea correlate with the real incomes of the locals. I am writing about it straightforwardly and honestly. We are also unaware of many of the everyday problems faced by Crimeans, just as by people anywhere else in the world. There is no doubt, however, that we have not seen people who look as if they have to live “under the duress of the occupation.” It is unlikely that anyone would be forced to tie

St. George’s ribbon, symbolizing the victory over Nazism in World War II, or the Russian flag inside the cabs, which almost all local taxi drivers do. It is hardly mandatory to hang the Russian flag on balconies and private homes. I deeply doubt that the local authorities forced the locals to act this way, demonstrating their outward patriotism, their connection with Russia, on purpose because we were visiting.

On the other hand, during this trip, we had the opportunity to interact with ordinary people: on the plane, in cabs, in the stores while shopping, or in cafes. Since 2016, I have visited

Crimea a dozen times, both solo and with various groups. And always people in Crimea have been genuinely happy to have someone from the West come to firsthand assess the situation.

Russia's opponents often argue that Crimeans in the referendum were compelled to tick a certain box on the ballot because they were under pressure. If so, why doesn't the international community propose a new referendum with international electoral observers watching? The answer will probably be simple: the outcome will be the same. I am sure our Western intelligence agencies and diplomats know this all too well. Former US Secretary of State John Kerry was also aware of this, as it turned out lately. When the Russian edition of my book was being prepared for publication, the Russian foreign minister did an interview with RTVi, where he suddenly opened up, something uncommon of diplomats of his rank. He told that, in their private conversation, John Kerry suggested holding a repeat referendum in Crimea featuring foreign observers to maintain formal decorum for the West, and admitted to Lavrov that he had no doubts about the outcome of such a vote since "he gets everything."

Another American, the writer Mark Twain, who in the 19th century, also visited Russian Crimea, wittily remarked: "Travel is fatal to prejudice."

In my opinion, this statement best summarizes the outcome of our trip to Crimea.



*Sergey Aksyonov, head of the Republic of Crimea, votes in the referendum.
Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.*



Chapter 5.

INTERNATIONAL LAW

Throughout the world, the struggle for resources and influence is manifested both in hidden and open overtly cynical military conflicts, extending to the direct meddling of some states in the sovereign affairs of others. Regardless of the nature of these conflicts, there is no denying that a number of territories within sovereign states seek to change their constitutional and legal status. Examples include Scotland as part of the UK, Catalonia as part of Spain, and Flanders as part of Belgium. Some states go unrecognized (e.g., the Moldovan Republic of Transnistria and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh) or partially recognized (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Republic of Kosovo) by the international community. Thus, modern global processes suggest that the existing borders of states are not yet finally established and that the political map of the world may undergo changes in the future. The most striking and buzzed-about event of the spring of 2014 was the accession to the Russian Federation of two new constituent entities: the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

Russia's ostensible violation of international law in connection with its reunification with Crimea caused a sharp response from the United States, Canada, Australia, the EU, and Norway. Sanctions were introduced and a large number of joint projects were postponed.

Opponents and supporters of the Crimean referendum argue about the interpretation of International Law in connection with the March 16, 2014 vote. Russia feels obligated to

explain itself to the Western world. Moreover, in terms of modern International Law, the people of Crimea had sufficient legal grounds to exercise the right of self-determination by seceding from Ukraine. For example, a team of five of Russia's most respected lawyers released an analytical report in 2017. Without delving into the political and economic particulars and using a comprehensive approach, the authors of the report assessed this event from a legal perspective, i.e., from the perspective of International Law and the Legislation of the Russian Federation.

According to the report, back then Russia acted in full compliance with International Law because its military presence in Crimea (Black Sea Fleet) was precipitated by an international treaty with Ukraine and by International Law. The Russian Armed Forces could move around the territory of Crimea because it was stipulated by an international treaty between Russia and Ukraine, which was ratified by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

The presence of Russian troops in Crimea and Sevastopol is stipulated by the Russian-Ukrainian agreement of May 28, 1997. The Russian military did not take part in the voting and could not affect its result. Since there was a real threat that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the radical Right Sector would seize administrative buildings to disrupt the referendum, law and order at the polling stations was ensured by self-defense fighters and volunteer patrols of Crimean residents who also did not interfere with the voting procedure.

On March 18, 2014, in his address to Russian MPs, the Russian President stressed that "Russia did not deploy its troops to Crimea, but only reinforced its presence, while not exceeding the servicemen limit stipulated by the international treaty." According to Putin, such measures were taken to protect "the lives of citizens of the Russian Federation, our

compatriots, and the servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation stationed in Ukraine in accordance with an international treaty” amid lawlessness and threats by nationalist extremists.

Thus, the unsubstantiated allegations of the use of Russian Armed Forces before, during, and after the Crimean referendum are not legally substantiated and are designed to cook up reasons challenging the legitimacy of the referendum.

The central issue — the crisis in Ukraine, brought on by the anti-constitutional nationalist coup in Kyiv as a result of an armed seizure of power by extremists — is related, according to the authors of the report, to the question of the legality of this “power” itself. Those who came to power in Ukraine by force committed a criminal offense, and their actions could not be legally valid for the people of Crimea.

In this regard, Conclusion No. 762 / 2014CDL-AD(2014)002 of the Venice Commission on the Crimean referendum dated March 21, 2014, is unconvincing. It reads that “there are numerous provisions of the Ukrainian Constitution that very clearly indicate that secession of a part of the country cannot be the subject of a local referendum.” It cannot be the case because the constitutional provisions concerning the operations of the Ukrainian authorities that were in force before the coup d’état in Kyiv were violated, and the extraordinary circumstances in Crimea (the real threat to the Crimean people as the highest value; the outbreak of civil war) prevented them from running a referendum without measures to ensure its safety and security, which is a duty of the lawful authorities of Crimea.

Summarizing their report, Russian lawyers state that in Crimea, there was an instance of voluntary secession from the state not governed by a legal authority, the declaration of

state independence by a legitimate representative body represented by the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, confirmed at the referendum, which approved the separation from Ukraine. It was followed by the accession of the independent Crimean state to the Russian Federation and reunification with Russia in accordance with the will of the people of Crimea, which fundamentally excludes annexation, i.e., a forceful annexation by one state of part of another. Thus, the claim some politicians are making of the Crimean referendum being held allegedly in violation of international law looks preposterous, and the UN General Assembly resolution No. A/RES/68/262 of March 27, 2014, on the “territorial integrity” of Ukraine, hastily adopted under pressure from Western countries without objective legal analysis, appears to be unfounded. In addition, it is not supported by most UN member states.

The declaration of independence does not violate international law and cannot do so, which was confirmed by the International Court of Justice, which, in its judgment of July 22, 2010, affirmed that “the unilateral declaration of independence by a part of a State does not violate any rule of international law ... General international law contains no applicable prohibition of declarations of independence.”

Such was the opinion of Russian legal experts.

However, Western lawyers in their articles refer to the stance of the so-called Venice Commission, which, at the request of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland, issued an opinion on “whether the decision of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in Ukraine to organize a referendum on accession to the Russian Federation.”⁵

⁵ <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD%282014%29002-e>

Already on March 21, 2014, the commission was very quick to express doubt “about the compliance of the referendum with the Ukrainian Constitution.”

Paragraph 22 of the Opinion states: “A number of circumstances make it appear questionable whether the referendum of 16 March 2014 could be held in compliance with international standards.” The first thing the commission referred to was the fact that at the time, there was no law regulating local referendums in Ukraine. Therefore, it is unclear under what rules the referendum was held.

It is worth noting that at the time of the referendum in Crimea, Ukraine did not have a legitimate government. The elected president, contrary to the Ukrainian Constitution, was deposed following the coup. This raises the question: To what extent did law and order prevail in Kyiv or Ukraine?

The commission’s second argument relates to the presence of the so-called “polite people”: “the massive public presence of military forces that “is not conducive to democratic decision making.” At the same time, the Commission concedes that in adopting this Opinion, it “has not made a comprehensive assessment of the current situation in Crimea.”

Also, the document continues, “concerns have been expressed, including by the OSCE, with respect to the freedom of expression in Crimea.” However, according to the OSCE website, the observation mission in Ukraine did not begin its work until March 21, 2014, just one day before the Venice Commission’s report was released. As before, the OSCE has no observers in Crimea. Therefore, it must be assumed that the information to which the OSCE refers comes from Kyiv. The big question is how unbiased and independent this information was and still is.

Furthermore, the Crimean government specifically invited the OSCE to the referendum as an observer. This invitation, however, was declined.

The fourth point refers to the brief period of only ten days from the date of the announcement to the day of the referendum. According to the head of the Crimean parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, the Crimean government initially scheduled the referendum for May 25, 2014. However, due to significant pressure from the population of Crimea, the referendum was rescheduled for an earlier date.

As a fifth reason, the Commission points to allegedly unexplained issues related to the fact that the parliament in Simferopol approved the Declaration of Independence of Crimea on March 11, 2014. This allegedly calls into question the legal implications of the referendum.

However, this is out of the question: Vladimir Konstantinov has already addressed this point in his book. The Crimean government primarily sought to preserve the status of an autonomous republic with expanded powers within Ukraine. But this option was strongly rejected by the residents of Crimea, too. They wanted independence and eventual unification with the Russian Federation.

Konstantinov writes: “We were groping for a way out in a trap.”

Paragraph 26 and the related Opinion of the Venice Commission contain the following reference: “With respect to the referendum of 16 March 2014, the Venice Commission can only note that no negotiations aimed at a consensual solution took place before the referendum was called. Due to the multi-ethnic composition of the population of Crimea (Russian, Ukrainians, Tatars and others), such negotiations would have been particularly important.”

At the same time, the Commission only refers to the topic of negotiations with the population of Crimea. However, the high turnout and the stunningly unanimous result of the vote indicate that these negotiations were superfluous in this case.



Participants of the Yalta International Economic Forum. Photo archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

Chapter 5.1.

INTERNATIONAL LAW: ALTERNATIVE POINTS OF VIEW EXIST IN THE WEST

The most surprising thing about Crimea's reunification with Russia in March 2014 was not the event itself, but the hasty reaction to it by Western politicians and media. On March 6, ten days before the popular vote on the future of Crimea and Sevastopol, US President Barack Obama said that the referendum "would violate the Ukrainian Constitution and International Law." German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the accession of Crimea to Russia an annexation. Almost all leading politicians of the Western world, who decided to weigh in on the event, considered the actions of the authorities of Crimea and Russia a gross violation of International Law. According to European governments, Crimea is occupied and annexed by Russia. Thus, International Law is violated. This is also the position of most European media outlets. A different opinion in the West is only allowed to a very limited extent. From this, we could conclude that there is unanimity in condemning Russian actions and that Russia is trying to justify itself with hypocritical arguments. However, this is far from being the case.

Reinhard Merkel, a lawyer, Philosopher of Law, and member of the German Ethics Council, wrote an in-depth piece for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in April 2014, in which he clearly distinguished between "annexation" and "secession," the separation of territory from the state by decision of its population or authorities.

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In International Law, annexation is the forcible addition of territory against the will of the state to which it belongs to another state," writes Reinhard Merkel. "Annexations violate the prohibition on the use of violence in inter-state relations, a fundamental norm of the legal order of the world. Typically, they are carried out as "military offensives," the gravest form of illegal actions in interstate relations. In such a case, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, they give the attacked state the right to use military force in self-defense and to request assistance from third states. It is the right to go to war without authorization by the UN Security Council."

If Crimea's reunification had been an annexation, Ukraine would have been forced to defend itself against Russia, and third countries, such as the United States, would have had the right to come to its aid without a UN mandate. This would have meant an open war against Russia, but that did not happen. Because there simply was no annexation.

With this in mind, Reinhard Merkel warns against interpreting the term "annexation" too loosely and concludes: "Of course, this abstract definition gives a great deal of room for interpretation. And one interpretation allows the West to accuse Russia of aggressive actions, with which it justifies its own outrage. But this is propaganda. What happened in Crimea is called something else: secession."

In his article, he concluded that the secession of Crimea and the subsequent referendum were in full compliance with International Law, and not in violation of it, as most Western countries claim. However, Merkel makes a reservation: both the secession and the referendum were violations of the Ukrainian Constitution. However, this is not a matter of International Law, and since the Ukrainian constitution does not apply to Russia, the latter had the right to agree to Crimea's accession. Nevertheless, the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation just

two days after its secession from Ukraine and because of Russia's military presence outside its own territory was a violation of International Law. However, this does not render Crimea's secession invalid and the subsequent incorporation of the peninsula into Russia cannot be considered an "annexation in disguise." So, to a greater extent, we should talk about secession, the German lawyer asserts.

In addition, he draws further conclusions: although the illegal military presence of Russia was a violation of the prohibition of intervention in inter-state relations, "even if it prevented the bloody violence," it "in no way cancels the secession, which became possible for this reason," but gives other states the right "to retaliate, for example, via sanctions." Here is what Reinhard Merkel thinks about it:

"Their adequacy, however, should be calibrated factoring in the real reason for their use, but not a fictitious threat, that is, military coercion on foreign territory, but not a violent annexation... The threat of violence was not directed against citizens or the Crimean parliament, but against soldiers of the Ukrainian army. Thus, there was an armed intervention by the central authorities to prevent secession. That is why Russian troops blocked the Ukrainian barracks, instead of guarding the polling stations."

One must agree with Reinhard Merkel's basic assertion that the secession and referendum complied with International Law, but not with his further inferences that the Russian military presence in Crimea and the security of the referendum by Russian soldiers as well as the direct recognition of the Republic of Crimea by Russia was a violation of International Law. This point of view of the German lawyer seems unconvincing, and here is why. In answering the question of whether the measures taken were in accordance with International Law, one should factor in not only the danger to the population of Crimea posed by the putsch in Ukraine

but also the fact that the United States and NATO would have threatened the Russian naval base in Sevastopol. If Crimea had not become part of Russia and remained Ukrainian, but the coup plotters who came to power in Kyiv began to violate the civil rights of the peninsula's residents, the situation there now would be the same as in eastern Ukraine: there would be a civil war, cities and villages would be destroyed, thousands would end up slaughtered, and hundreds of thousands would become refugees. Besides, NATO would have direct access to the major base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

We must not forget that Crimea belonged to Russia for 171 years, and only in 1954, in violation of the Constitution of the USSR, it was "gifted" to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev. However, at the time, it was nothing more than the transfer of Crimea from one union republic to another within one state.

Since, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, in case of conflict, it is legitimate to use armed forces for the purpose of self-defense and to seek assistance from third countries, this provision was also applicable after the declaration of state sovereignty of Crimea on March 11, 2014. In that situation, conflict was very much on the cards. There were many casualties in Kyiv, Ukrainian armed forces and nationalist units were ready to invade Crimea, and a bloody civil war broke out in eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter. The presence of the Russian military in close proximity to the Ukrainian barracks during the referendum was also necessary for the normal conduct of the voting and, consequently, for the right of the peninsula residents to self-determination and for their protection. It was a *sui generis* humanitarian intervention,⁶ thereby conforming to International Law.

⁶ *Sui generis* is a Latin expression denoting the uniqueness of a legal construct.

By the way, there is considerable doubt that the Constitution of Ukraine remained in effect at all after the putsch. The country was consumed by lawlessness, martial law was imposed in some regions, and after the “regime change,” Ukraine almost voluntarily surrendered itself to the power of the United States. Thus, the provision on guarantees of its territorial integrity by Russia in accordance with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum effectively lapsed.

Despite my disagreement with the thesis of armed intervention by Russian troops, Professor Reinhard Merkel’s article is, in my opinion, the best and most revealing of those published by the Western media. Although the author gave me permission to use the full text of his article, at the last minute, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) forbade me to reprint the text in this book. So, I can only refer to the original source. I have not been told the reasons for the ban, so we can only assume that the FAZ editor-in-chief views this article as a kind of “failure” and would not like to see quotes from it.

Reinhard Merkel’s stance on the Crimean referendum has many opponents, such as the director of the Max Planck Institute, Anne Peters. That said, upon closer inspection, the articles of Merkel’s opponents appear to be a trite rehash of the EU’s official view of the events in Crimea. Nor can the opposing opinion of Klaus Kress, an international lawyer and former advisor to the Federal Government, be called independent, as expressed in his interview to Spiegel Online on March 31, 2014. “By the way, don’t you find the answers to the carefully ‘selected questions’ of the ‘referendum’ in Crimea almost ‘suspicious’ when you consider that there are other nationalities there besides those ethnic Russians?” he clarifies in response to a reporter’s statement that there was still an almost unanimously expressed opinion.

Professor of International Law Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider⁷ was also among those who dared to challenge the official account of the “annexation.” He commented on this in his essay “The Struggle for Crimea as a Problem of State and International Law,” published in 2014. In it, the German professor notes that the West facilitated, if not orchestrated, the coup in Ukraine, which was a major violation of Ukraine’s internal and external sovereignty.

According to Professor Schachtschneider, Russia’s annexation of Crimea was consistent with the right of peoples to self-determination because no state has legal grounds for restricting the free expression of the will of citizens and peoples living within its borders. “The failed mission of the foreign ministers of France, Poland, and Germany to peacefully overthrow the elected president of Ukraine, the election of a new president, and a return to the 2004 Constitution was hardly compatible with the existing Ukrainian Constitution and its sovereignty; even more incompatible with it is the violation of the February 21, 2014 agreement, by the rebels and their violent seizure of power,” he claims.

Professor Schachtschneider challenges what he views as an outdated theory of state law, under which the state is seen as an inviolable political entity whose preservation can and should be ensured by all means, even through foreign intervention. The modern history of states, he emphasizes, up to and including the changes in modern times, contradicts this state doctrine. In his view, it is not states that are sovereign, but people, its citizens. States are organizations of civil societies; through states, these societies try to realize their common good. The primary subject of politics is the people, whose most important right is political freedom as a centerpiece of their dignity. From this stems the right of peoples to self-

⁷ http://www.volksdeutsche-stimme.eu/aktuell/schacht_2014.htm

determination. This refers to the right of peoples to self-determination, which is the central idea of the United Nations Charter. This right, according to Mr. Schachtschneider, protects the freedom of the people, not the preservation of states at all costs: “Even a constitutional law, such as in Ukraine, which proclaims a unitary state and does not prescribe or provide for the right of withdrawal of territories, cannot prohibit the withdrawal of a part of the people from the state. The formation of the state is an act of freedom and thus the sovereignty of people living together. There are no perpetual states, and there is no right of states, much less a right of state agencies to assert their existence against people and citizens, against their right, much less assert it by force of arms. Moreover, there is an obligation for people to live with each other under the law and to ensure this legal position through an organization called the state, to provide a natural right to a civil constitution that guarantees liberty and property. For example, the Free State of Bavaria has the right to secede from Germany, at least, if an “existential situation” arises, and to continue to exist as a separate state or to join Austria or Switzerland.”

Crimea, as an autonomous republic populated predominantly by ethnic Russians and having belonged to Russia for centuries, Mr. Schachtschneider correctly observes, has always had every right to go its own way and the right to secede from Ukraine. Ukrainian native Nikita Khrushchev administratively annexed Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 on the assumption that the Soviet Union would exist forever. In 1993, the Russian parliament declared Sevastopol a Russian city on foreign territory, an enclave of sorts. The 1997 and 2010 treaties between Russia and Ukraine changed its status without the aim to reduce Russian influence. It was only the new Ukrainian policy, influenced by the West, that attempted to incorporate Sevastopol into the state territory of Ukraine and declare it to be an unrestricted Ukrainian state power.

Norway can also boast honest jurists like Professor Peter Thomas Ørebech at the Norges Fiskerihøgskole of the Arctic University in Tromsø and Gunnar Nerdrum, a lawyer at the Norwegian Supreme Court. Their views on the Crimean referendum also contravene the official interpretation. At a conference organized by our NGO “People’s Diplomacy — Norway” in Oslo in March 2019, entitled “Who Has the Right to Crimea?”, Professor Ørebech explained in detail why the reunification of Crimea with Russia is not an annexation.

Both lawyers cite the statement of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which, in its legal opinion to the UN General Assembly of July 22, 2010, noted that even without a referendum, Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence was legal. In this way, the West itself set a precedent that can now be invoked by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

To better assess the fears of Russian-speaking residents of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it also pays to look at the situation of the right-wing radical forces that were active instigators on Maidan. It is often argued in the West that Russian media reports about this social group are exaggerated. In doing so, an attempt is made to question the fears of Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine or Crimea. From my point of view, though, there are plenty of facts justifying such fears. For example, the leader of the far-right extremist Svoboda (Ukrainian Freedom Party), Oleg Tyahnybok, widely known for his anti-Semitic views, argued in the parliament back in 2012 that Ukraine is ruled by a “Moscow–Jewish mafia” and that “Ukraine must finally belong to Ukrainians.” Tyahnybok called Jews “occupants of Ukraine” and glorified the Ukrainian insurgent army, the Nazi police during World War II, for killing Jews.⁸ It is curious that at the time, the German federal government responded to a request from a number of Bundestag deputies from the Left party regarding statements by Ukrainian

⁸ <https://www.7kanal.co.il/News/News.aspx/155824>

nationalists: “The Svoboda Party is a rather populist and nationalist party, which partly stands for far-right positions.” The ideology, political tradition, and all previous activities of right-wing extremists in Ukraine made their active involvement in the confrontation inevitable. As soon as they appeared on Maidan in the winter of 2013/2014 the leaders of the nationalist Ukrainian parties made their aggressive stance crystal clear by subordinating the initially democratic protest to their radical slogans, their will, and their political agenda. Flags sporting Nazi and Stepan Bandera symbols dominated the insignia of other parties. It was radical militants who attacked law enforcement on the streets of Kyiv, spurring a bloodbath. Later, it became known that almost a thousand police officers were injured or wounded on Maidan. In addition, 18 to 23 law enforcement officers were killed in Kyiv, according to various sources. The circumstances of their deaths have been partially probed: the Ukrainian investigators have already identified, after the Maidan events, shooters from the protesters who opened fire on Instytutska Street on February 20. However, no one has been prosecuted and no cases have been brought to court. Moreover, access to investigation records is restricted. The scale of violence against law enforcement officers is chilling. After reading about this the newspaper articles only, presenting the Maidan activists as solely defensive and “peaceful protesters” makes little sense.

Thus, right-wing radicals and fascist forces appeared on Maidan in 2014, and later even assumed major offices in the interim government and state apparatus. Günter Verheugen, the former EU Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry and Vice President of the European Commission, breaks the taboo in his interview with Deutsche Welle: “For the first time in this century, the popular ideologues have allowed real fascists into government...” Other European politicians also confirm this point. As reported by the German weekly newspaper Der Freitag, in April 2014, the Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv hosted an exhibition titled “Beware of the Russians!”

As the creative Maidan-spawned artists understood it, this “cultural project” looked like this: three people with St. George ribbons are sitting in a cage on the floor piled with garbage with a sign saying, “Don’t come too close”. They drink vodka, play the balalaika, insult visitors, and threaten them with the advent of Putin. The organizers of the exhibition said that in this way, they tried to represent the nature of the Russian people. In the same article, German historian and political scientist Alexander Rahr writes that one of the driving forces behind the coup were right-wing and well-organized pro-Nazi organizations, such as Right Sector. Leading German media, such as the ARD TV network, reported from the very beginning of the Maidan events on the negative role of right-wing extremist forces in the political processes in Ukraine. In an ARD video, reporters quoted a statement by Elmar Brok, a longtime member of the European Parliament from the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU): “Many German politicians close their eyes tight and recognize right-wing extremists in the new Ukrainian government, guided by the motto: Putin’s enemy is my friend.”

However, the vast majority of the Western media tried to portray the right-wing radicals and nationalists on Maidan as Russian propaganda, seeking to diminish the importance of these parties and organizations. The Federal Center for Political Education, which is part of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, responsible for combating right-wing extremism in Germany, also turns a blind eye to the activities of Ukrainian radicals. On its websites and in the report “Ukraine. Analysis No. 133,” it only voices slight criticism of both parties, Svoboda and Right Sector. The quirkiness of this logic is this: since Svoboda and Right Sector fought for Maidan and, therefore, for the European Union, they cannot be as dangerous as they are portrayed in the press. Given the fact that many well-known journalists, politicians, and even the German federal government have spoken out about nationalist forces and their acts of violence, the reassuring explanations of the Federal Center for Political Education seem very **naïve**. I have

a simple question: How would all this be presented if nationalist encroachments were made in another European country or against a particular target group?

The fact that the EU had no qualms recognizing the new interim government that emerged after the February coup in Kyiv to immediately resume negotiations on the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union deeply shook the confidence of the residents of southeastern Ukraine in our version of democracy.



In Sevastopol, with Senator Olga Timofeeva. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

Chapter 5.2.

WHAT DO SEVASTOPOL RESIDENTS HAVE TO SAY? SENATOR OLGA TIMOFEEVA

My Crimean interlocutors shared with me their personal impressions of what was happening on the peninsula ahead of the memorable day of the referendum. Many were worried about whether Russia would let them join it because they understood that a forceful invasion of Crimea by radicals was inevitable if Russia decided otherwise. The descriptions of these tumultuous and dramatic days are suffused with great uncertainty and, in part, fear of how the future situation might unfold. No one knew what was going to happen. What path would the Crimean government take or would it even be able to stand up to Kyiv? What was happening to the relatives of Crimeans in Ukraine? Those who have not heard these stories and seen the facial expressions of the narrators can hardly comprehend the tremendous relief they felt on the evening of March 17, 2014, when Russian President Vladimir Putin first announced the recognition of Crimea as an independent state and then approved the draft treaty on the reunification of Crimea with Russia.⁹

Two days after the referendum, there were real popular festivities on the streets of all major cities on the Crimean Peninsula. People really rejoiced at the decision to return to Russia.

⁹ <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38202>

They considered their referendum fully legitimate. The feeling that the chaotic situation was now under control prevailed. The Crimeans finally felt safe.

“For 23 years, when we lived under Ukraine, we always went out to rallies and hid the Russian flag under our coats, and then we pulled it out, and the police grabbed us. They would beat us, chase us away, but we stuck to our guns. We knew it, we believed that one day we would return to Russia!” a woman, who is a resident of Sevastopol, told me.

During our visits to Crimea, we spoke several times with Senator from Sevastopol Olga Timofeeva, who was directly involved in those historic events. Here is part of this interview:

Hendrik Weber: Ms. Timofeeva, in 2014 you lived and worked in Sevastopol. What job did you have at that time and what was your profession??

Olga Timofeeva: In 2014, I was a senior lecturer with the Information Systems Chair at Sevastopol National Technical University. I graduated this University and worked there for 24 years. Also, at the time, I was the head of the NGO “Ravelin,” created to protect the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Sevastopol: the right to education in the Russian language, to preserve Russian history and culture, and allegiance to the Russian world. Over the past few years, these rights in Sevastopol and Crimea have been gradually reduced: for example, by 2011, there should have been no Russian-language schools on the peninsula, despite the fact that the vast majority of the population, especially in Sevastopol, are Russians. At the level of government policy, the Ukrainian state was revising historical events, particularly those of the Great Patriotic War: members of the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army), collaborators of Nazi Germany became its heroes. Of course, my friends and I could not remain indifferent to this take on history and the infringement of the rights of the Russian-speaking population of

Crimea. Earlier, between 2006 and 2010, I served as a deputy of the Leninsky District Council of Sevastopol and was engaged in public and welfare issues.

HW: Do you have a family, children?

OT: I have two adult sons, and they are already self-dependent. I can say that my family and my desire for my children to self-identify as Russian people have also nudged me toward public activity in defense of the rights of Russian citizens of Ukraine.

HW: Do you remember when you had the feeling that the Maidan nationalists might come to Crimea?

OT: The first sense of threat emerged in December 2013, when the clashes and the opposition to law enforcement began on Maidan. It was then that one of my friends said that Maidan would end up as Majdanek (a Nazi concentration camp during World War II) for Sevastopol. And when, in January 2014, the footage of the brutal murder of a policeman in Kyiv was broadcast live on Ukrainian TV networks and online, and comments on this heinous crime were heard, it became clear that fascists were craving power in Kyiv and that the events in Kyiv were a real threat to all of us.

HW: You certainly empathized with the events on Maidan. How did the people around you react to them? Were there those who welcomed the changes in Kyiv?

OT: Already since mid-January, people in my circle had understood the course of events and were preparing to counter Euromaidan. And we began joining forces long before the coup and the events on Maidan. In September and October 2013, when the state authorities of Ukraine embarked on a course toward European integration, we realized we had to look for an

alternative. We decided to collect petition signatures of distinguished and respected people in the city and send a letter to deputies of Sevastopol, municipal and city councils, as well as to the deputies representing Sevastopol in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, demanding that they determine their position: Do they support the European association or the Eurasian Union? Thus appeared the “Letter of 69”: it was signed by 69 respected Sevastopol residents, whom we had addressed. That is how an association of like-minded people began to form, of those who understood that European integration processes would be disastrous for the Russian city.

HW: Do you remember the days preceding the referendum? What was the mood of the people in Crimea?

OT: The mood of the people in Crimea was elevated, I’d say, even festive because we were really looking forward to this day, waiting for the return of Sevastopol and Crimea to their homeland, to Russia. Mass protests in Crimea against the Maidan coup broke out in Sevastopol: on February 23, 2014, a rally was staged, where Sevastopol residents declined to recognize the new government in Kyiv and elected Alexei Chalyi as people’s mayor of Sevastopol. This event, almost 50,000-strong, was called the Rally of the People’s Will. February 23 was followed by several days of uncertainty: the choice was made, but we didn’t know where it would lead us, whether Russia would accept us, what actions Ukraine would take, and how things would be unfolding. It was a serious gamble. There is an adage: “with your shield or on it,” which means “to win or perish.” Those were tempestuous days; we really didn’t know where we would end up. Then, in late February, I got a call from a friend of mine: “Olga, there’s a flag over the Crimean parliament building!” — “What flag?” — “Our flag! Ours! Russian! Our people are in town!” Then we learned that this flag was hoisted by the Berkut special police unit. And this moment, when we learned about the flag over the Crimean

parliament, of course, boosted our confidence and gave us hope that we weren't alone and could actually ride it out.

HW: Did you expect Crimea to rejoin Russia so quickly?

OT: Not yet in mid-February, but in early March, we did. There was a sense of relief, security, and anticipation of coming home. And on March 6, the date of the referendum was set, and from there on out, every day that passed brought us closer to our goal. Home! Home!

HW: Did you also vote on March 16, 2014? When did you go to the polls? Did you see lots of people?

OT: I showed up at my polling station by the time it opened, by 8 a.m., because later my friends and I would gather at the Referendum Information Center to stick together and foil possible provocations. Fortunately, there was no provocation. There was a line at my polling station already at 8 a.m., although it had just opened. Entire families turned up. And I had a curious encounter: after I cast the ballot, as I was about to leave, an elderly woman called me. She started thanking me because by then, we Russian Spring activists were already recognized on the streets. She told me how she and her husband prepared for the vote: they bought flowers the day before and woke up very early. As they were drinking tea in the kitchen, she told her husband: "My death certificate will read: Russian Federation." Her husband got mad at first: she was talking about death on such a festive day, but on second thought, he went: "You know what? You're right, it's a blessing to rest in one's native soil."

HW: Did you see any soldiers at the polling stations who wanted to sway the election?

OT: No, there were none.

HW: From your point of view, was there a chance that the Ukrainian army would try and mess with the referendum? Did the Ukrainian army or police take any actions?

OT: Provocations from the Ukrainian army were always a possibility. There are several episodes I know of involving opposition to our choice. Back on February 28, 2014, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Navy, which was stationed in Sevastopol, attempted to mobilize the staff. And then the townspeople, members of the self-defense militia, set up a round-the-clock watch blocking the Ukrainian headquarters and units of the Ukrainian Navy. Those were tumultuous days: we were standing by the headquarters alongside fellow residents of Sevastopol just like you, and we didn't know if they would start shooting at us because the Ukrainian soldiers there were armed. Some of the Ukrainian military joined the people, while others decided to leave for Ukraine, and a green corridor was opened for them. Some chose to stay in the blocked units, though. And at the entrance to the Crimean Peninsula, there were self-defense forces, members of the Berkut special police unit, who were the first to side with the people, and the Russian military — all of them protecting Crimea from a possible invasion. There were also attempts by nationalist groups to penetrate the peninsula from Ukraine.

HW: Looking back five years ago, would you say that the people of Crimea today would have made the same decision as they did in 2014?

OT: Sure, they would. Residents of Sevastopol and Crimea once again reaffirmed their decision by turning out in large numbers to cast their votes in the Russian presidential election on March 18, 2018, four years after the events of the Russian Spring. This is the best proof that their choice in 2014 was conscious and free, and that the results of the referendum were absolutely legitimate.

HW: What is the task ahead of you today, in 2019?

OT: I live in Moscow practically all the time because, since October 2014, I have been representing the city of Sevastopol in the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the country's parliament. The Legislative Assembly of the city of Sevastopol authorized me to be a member of the Federation Council to work in Russia's top-level legislative body. It is both a great responsibility and a great honor. In the Federation Council, I'm a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and I see my work for the region in facilitating to the uttermost Sevastopol's entry into the legislative framework of the Russian Federation and its further development as part of Russia.

HW: Vladimir Konstantinov writes in his book that it's very important to invite people from the West and show them Crimea. They need to see the situation for themselves to understand the rationale behind the people's choice. Would you agree with him?

OT: Of course, Vladimir Konstantinov is dead-on right. The state policy of a number of foreign countries and their media misinterpret the events of the Russian Spring as the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. This is totally wrong, and foreign guests who come to us from different countries can see that the residents of Crimea have always and still consider Russia their historical homeland. For Crimeans, the events of the Russian Spring mean returning home. When Crimea was transferred to Ukraine in 1954, it took place within one country, the USSR. At the time, no one could have imagined that the USSR would cease to exist and Crimea would find itself in another state, detached from Russia, with which it shared its entire history. Today, historical justice has been restored. But to understand this, you need to know the history of Russia and Crimea and also to come to Crimea and talk with people. We are open to everyone.

HW: Personally, I have only met people in Crimea who support reunification with Russia. However, some want faster and rapid development of Crimea, as well as higher pensions and salaries. Can you agree with that?

OT: It is natural: people want the world to change for the better, and this implies the development of infrastructure, the restoration of production, and decent wages. After the events of the Russian Spring, Crimea came under heavy pressure from Western countries. The mistake and injustice are that the people of Crimea are being punished by Western countries with sanctions for their commitment to their history, culture, and language, for a choice that was conscious, free, and their only viable option.

HW: What do you think is the most important for the future of Crimea?

OT: Peace and security in every respect. This applies not only to the external, international relations environment but also to internal one: the development of the economy and recreational potential, of the public sphere and social welfare. Crimea has a high potential and great opportunities that can and must be put into action. I'm convinced we will cope with all these challenges.

... Anyone who comes to Crimea with their eyes and ears open can hear such and similar accounts from the residents. It does not matter whether these are politicians or common people. This desire to rejoin Russia after the terrible events and nationalist violence in Kyiv was and still is held by the vast majority of residents of Crimea. Crimeans really wanted to go to Russia, and not for the sake of high pensions, but because of their sense of Homeland. Apparently, for most of them, Ukraine never became their Homeland.

Our human rights organizations, which “expose” every imaginary crime of the Russian government, report almost nothing about the Ukrainian nationalists. They probably have different areas of activities driven by the government funding.

Based on the facts, everyone can decide for oneself whether or not International Law was violated during the events in Crimea. But if one concludes that International Law has been violated, then one must also consistently criticize that violation in other cases, which we are very loath to do. The rule that we in the West willingly and often apply double standards is in effect. Whenever it is profitable, we tend to invoke International Law; in other cases — for example, when attacking Yugoslavia, Libya, Afghanistan, and so on — we gladly justify our violations of International Law and our meddling in the affairs of these countries by claiming that we only want to protect democracy and human rights. It would be futile complacency to hope that the most advanced international mechanisms and procedures will help to eliminate double standards problem. And yet, taking a sober look at this problem, we can talk about a real opportunity for civil society to confront double standards.

A close-up photograph of a woman at a public gathering. She is holding a white rectangular sign with both hands, displaying the text 'OSCE!' on the top line and 'GO HOME' on the bottom line, both written in large, bold, black, hand-painted capital letters. The woman has a determined expression, with her eyes slightly closed and a slight smile. She is wearing a red, textured knit sweater. Her fingernails are painted with pink nail polish. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a large-scale event or rally. The lighting is bright, indicating it is daytime.

OSCE!
GO HOME

Rally in support of the referendum in Crimea. Photo by Dmitry Rogulin, TASS.

Chapter 6.

SANCTIONS

In the foreword to this book, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea, Georgy Muradov, has already spoken quite clearly about the sanctions.

But I would like to bring up this topic once again because the legitimacy of sanctions and the sources of their legitimacy remain the central questions of the international debate. Add to it a question of political morality: Indeed, how ethical is it to use sanctions that could potentially harm large demographics of targeted countries and regions, such as Crimea, or virtually defenseless developing states?

Since the spring of 2014, the West has been trying hard to convince us that sanctions and isolation are Russia's punishment for annexing Crimea and supporting the People's Republics of Donbass. But I would like to remind the reader that hostile manifestations against Russia often occurred even before Crimea. The boycott of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, where nor the US president, neither the German chancellor never showed up, is one example. Back then, the oppression of sexual minorities in Russia was the alleged reason. But 12 years earlier, the Olympics were held in Utah, USA, where homosexual contacts were prohibited at all, as it was thought detrimental to the continuation of the human race. No big deal, the Olympics took place without any protests and boycotts from the progressive international community and human rights organizations.

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We all should be aware of the political, punitive role of sanctions, which, in today's international relations, are increasingly being used as an instrument of domination and the imposition of the will of some countries on others and are imposed without a serious evidentiary and legal basis. The sanctions policy against Russia is also of interest because, since the end of the bipolar confrontation in the world, it has become the first example of the use of sanctions as an instrument of coercion against nuclear power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, notably without the obligatory vote of the permanent members of the Security Council. The reason for this is probably related to the complexity of imposing comprehensive sanctions under UN auspices and the possibility of veto power on one's part to block sanctions. On March 6, 2014, the heads of state and government of the EU Council of Ministers imposed sanctions on various individuals in the Russian Federation, although Crimea was not "annexed" by Russia at that time. Countries such as Norway, Canada, Australia, and the United States introduced their own sanctions.

According to statements by Western politicians, all punitive measures were directed against Russia because Russia allegedly "destabilizes Ukraine," "Russia is an aggressor nation," and so on. All the while, it is hard to imagine more destabilization than what the Ukrainians themselves inflicted on their country. No one has ever bothered to explain what Russia's involvement in this is. There was no evidence of Russian military invasion, arms supplies, or other activities that would destabilize the situation in Ukraine, while the fact of destabilization as a result of financial and political support of Euromaidan by Western countries was quite obvious.

But the sanctions that were then snowballing did not hit Ukrainian politicians, the initiators of the coup d'état in Kyiv, but they did Russian citizens and legitimate representatives of the Ukrainian government. In particular, sanctions banning entry into the EU countries, as



Austrian writer Hannes Hofbauer presents his new book FEIND BILD RUSSLAND («Enemy Russia. A History of Demonization.») Photo from bditelnost.info.

well as confiscating their property and freezing deposits in European banks were imposed on 18 Ukrainian citizens, including the then-legitimate President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich and former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov.

When considering the anti-Russian sanctions, it is important to note that the set has been significantly expanded since March 2014. Initially, sanctions were imposed against specific individuals who, in the West's opinion, were involved in making decisions on Crimea. In September 2014, my good acquaintance Georgy Muradov, who represents the Republic of Crimea under the President of Russia, was included in this list. The rationale for this decision characterizes him as someone who “played a critical role in building Russia’s system of institutional control over Crimea during its illegitimate annexation.” In this connection, as an outside observer who understands the real situation, I immediately have a question: How

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could he do this if Muradov was appointed to his post almost five months later after the well-known events of the Crimean Spring, in August 2014, and he being a diplomat, is responsible for development of the republic's international relations?

On March 21, 2014, another prominent Russian politician, Sergei Glazyev, economic adviser to the Russian President, was also added to the sanctions list. At one time, under instructions of the Kremlin, he was involved in negotiations with Viktor Yanukovych on the possibility of closer cooperation between Ukraine and the Customs Union, an entity created by Russia as a kind of alternative to the EU for post-Soviet countries. The basis of trade cooperation was close industrial cooperative ties in all sectors of the economy. This kind of relationship provided opportunities for economic growth for both Ukraine and the countries of the Customs Union. Many analysts then noted that the prospects for Ukraine's economic cooperation with the EU depended on favorable conditions for its economic cooperation with Russia and other CIS countries.

In the West, Glazyev is accused of disrupting the execution of the association agreement with the EU by Yanukovych. But wait a minute: What does the "annexation of Crimea" have to do with negotiations on strengthening economic cooperation, which are conducted by any state with potential partners for mutual benefit? As we can see, this case defies logic. We are expected to immediately criminalize their assistance in "committing the act," while the alleged guilt of Muradov and Glazyev is completely unproven. There is not a single fact confirming that the accused's actions are identical to the criminal outcome, there is no direct causal link and no notorious presumption of innocence against defendants. Apparently, realizing that this situation belongs to the realm of unscientific fiction, the Western initiators of sanctions against specific individuals used the vague term "actions to facilitate...." Therefore, absolutely



The UN General Assembly did not recognize the results of the referendum in Crimea. Ukraine's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Yury Serheyev, left, and acting Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchysia after voting on the resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity at the plenary session of the General Assembly. USA, New York City, March 28. Photo by Niu Xiaolei Xinhua, Zuma, TASS.

anyone can be hit with the random accusations. In the fall of 2018, I had the opportunity to meet personally with Sergei Glazyev and his wife and hear his competent perspective on the links between Ukraine's negotiations to join an association with the EU and Russia and the subsequent escalation of the civil conflict in that country.

Nevertheless, Europe did not consider it possible to cooperate with Russia as before by turning a blind eye to the objective truth about the events in Crimea and Donbass, so

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two main types of sanctions — economic and non-economic — began to be applied to Russia. Non-economic sanctions include bans and restrictions on cooperation in international organizations (the OECD, NATO, the exclusion of Russia from the G8, the eight most economically advanced countries, which occurred on the eve of the summit of this organization, which was to be held in the Russian city of Sochi in June 2014, freezing mechanisms of dialogue with the EU, etc.), the cancellation of government visits and parliamentary exchange, a ban on issuing visas and, therefore, on entry into the country, including transit through the country, refusal to participate in international economic and political summits hosted by Russia, as well as in cultural and sports events, the ban and restrictions on Russian TV networks' broadcasting abroad, and etc. All of these have been actively used against Russia in recent years.

Along with the diplomatic sanctions in March 2014, the US and EU imposed repeatedly expanded and extended targeted sanctions with a wide variety of tools of restriction, such as travel bans and asset freezes, which apply to specific blacklisted individuals and entities. Since June 2014, the specific restrictions have been supplemented with a regional subset, i.e., economic sanctions against Crimea (first, import restrictions, then partial export-investment and full investment restrictions) are already in effect. According to the EU website, the following measures were imposed on Crimea because of the “annexation”:

The EU has imposed a ban on the import of goods from Crimea and Sevastopol if they are supported by a certificate of origin authorized by the Ukrainian authorities.

Investments in Crimea or Sevastopol are prohibited. Europeans and EU-based companies may not purchase real estate or acquire businesses in Crimea, provide financial support to Crimean companies, or render related services.

The EU travel companies are not allowed to provide services in Crimea or Sevastopol. European cruise ships, except in emergencies, may no longer enter the harbors of the Crimean Peninsula or the water areas around it. This applies to all ships that are owned by Europeans or sail under the flag of EU member states.

The supply or provision for use by Crimea-based companies of goods or technologies in transportation, telecommunications, and power industry, as well as geological and oil exploration and mining of mineral resources, is prohibited.

Technical assistance, mediation, maintenance of building structures and infrastructure, etc., are not available to these sectors.

My typology of restrictive measures leads to the conclusion that the current sanctions policy against Russia is a collective effort. It links several international organizations and forums and more than 30 sanctioning states from different regions of the world: these are, first of all, the active core — the USA and EU countries — and then the supporting participants: Canada, Australia, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, New Zealand, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Over time, it is becoming increasingly clear that the United States, as the main initiator of the anti-Russian sanctions, is widely using these tools against Russian businesses to force Russian competitors out of the European and, in part, out of the US market. In 2016, a book was published in Austria, whose title caught my eye: “Enemy Russia. A History of Demonization.” Its author is the Austrian writer and publisher Hannes Hofbauer, who has studied Western Russophobia that dates back to the 15th century. However, the book has become most gripping, at least for me, once I have read the chapters on the collapse of the socialist camp, the post-Soviet era, and contemporary events in Ukraine, when the author illustrates this

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with numerous examples of non-market competition from the United States, whose policies are guided by a sanctions regime.

Hofbauer explains how sanctions were used to push the Katod Russian manufacturer of night vision devices out of the US market. In another case, a Russian company was got into the US sanctions list after it had already delivered goods ordered under a contract. Pressured by other European states and the US, France had to cancel the contract with Russia to supply Mistral helicopter carriers and suffered an economic loss of about €1.2 billion. And my home country, Norway, which had previously successfully cooperated with Russia in various domains, is now following in the wake of vicious sanctions regime, although it is absolutely contrary to its own interests. Even more cynical and ambiguous was the statement of US Vice President Joe Biden, who said that it was the president of the United States who forced Europe to take measures so that Russia “would pay for it.” To me, this is clear evidence that today, even such strong players in the European Union as Germany or France are not 100% sovereign states, whereas American businesses have definitely benefited from the sanctions. They have slowly but surely crushed all of the American rivals.

Meanwhile, the United States, which had a relatively small trade turnover with Russia, has not suffered great economic losses. In absolute terms, trade turnover between Russia and America, which, in 2011–2014, was estimated at a steady \$28 billion, by 2016, had fallen by 27%, a factor that reflects a general downtrend in trade with all of Russia’s commercial partners amid sanctions. On the other hand, the trade with the EU, which accounted for up to 49%, or \$417 billion, of Russia’s foreign trade, has been much more affected. Not only Ukrainian and Russian individuals and companies have to pay for the sanctions today, but also European companies, and above all about 6,200 German companies that have done or are still doing

business in Russia. The EU foreign trade with Russia tallied €336 billion in 2012 but dropped to €191 billion already in 2016, one year into the sanctions. The Norwegian–Russian Chamber of Commerce in Oslo reported losses for the Norwegian economy incurred by the sanctions. In the first quarter of 2015, exports of goods from Norway to Russia plummeted 78%. As a consequence, the previously unpopular view that the sanctions are against our own interests gradually began to spread in the mainstream Western media. Representatives of the scientific and expert community have also spoken out. According to their estimates, Europe has suffered significant job cuts, while the total damage to the economy has reportedly amounted to about €100 billion. For example, a reputable association of German businesses warned of the disastrous ramifications of the sanctions policy, in particular, not only a massive reduction of exports but also the loss of 60,000 jobs. Similar losses were incurred by Greece, Finland, and Poland, countries with a high percentage of agricultural exports to Russia.

The danger for the European economy also lies in the fact that large multinational corporations are simply setting up branches or companies abroad to circumvent the sanctions and thus directly supply products to the Russian market. Unfortunately, therefore, the jobs vacated in Germany or Norway will most likely no longer be in demand if the sanctions are lifted as the market niches will be taken over by other companies and other employees. Some businesses have already found workarounds to ship their products to Crimea. For example, stores on the Yalta embankment are fully stocked with branded products of Adidas, Ecco, Benetton, and other European clothing companies. Even the production companies that we visited in Crimea, including various agricultural businesses, manage to get the cutting-edge equipment from Europe quite legally, albeit using bypasses. Russia, it turns out, has a much higher margin of safety, and the sanctions are not yet so extensive. The main threat is the ongoing sanctions blockade of Crimea. But Moscow has enough resources to compensate for the sanctions

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against the peninsula. That is why Henry Kissinger, the wise former US Secretary of State, was thousand times right as he warned politicians that “the use of sanctions is not a strategy, but an expression of a lack of strategy.”

But it was the residents of Crimea and Donbass who really bore the brunt of the Western sanctions. They cannot get and approval to enter the USA, EU, or Norway, nor are they able to maintain family and kinship ties. First of all, this applies to the numerous diasporas of European nations living in Crimea:

Germans, Italians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Estonians. Restrictions are sometimes absurd and plain cruel. For example, one person, a member of the European diaspora, was denied a visa to travel to the funeral of their relative. Students at the high school we visited in Donetsk, who previously regularly traveled to Europe, told me that student exchanges were no longer possible. Teachers from Europe, who previously taught at universities and schools in Crimea and Donbass, may no longer go there. The same applies to the technical university in Sevastopol, whose cooperation with European universities, its former academic partners, has ground to a halt.

Essentially, we, the countries of the West, have taken the populations of Crimea and Donbass hostage. But hey, where is the active protest of our numerous human rights organizations against this injustice that affects mostly the civilian population? I hardly see it coming, and it is human rights that should be the main measure of ethics, legitimacy, and effectiveness of sanctions. For example, a report by the Norwegian human rights organization Human Rights Foundation states: “At the same time, a ‘wall of silence’ is being erected around the peninsula, which blocks international human rights organizations’ access to Crimea and monitoring of the situation from their side, which increases the impunity with which occupation authorities violate human rights.”

But if we believe that because of the sanctions and the difficulties that have arisen, people in Crimea or Donbass will one day oppose their leadership and we will make concessions to Russia because of this, we are deluded. In trying times, as has been the case multiple times in Russian history, people will unite and once again turn their backs on Europe. Do we want it? I would not be so sure...

At the same time, I am practically confident of something else: sooner or later, the Western sanctions against Russia will be lifted. Pressure on politicians from businesses and economic organizations will continue. Therefore, even now the question arises - how we are planning to get out of this self-inflicted predicament with dignity. This task sometimes reminds me of the title of a famous "Mission Impossible" TV show starring Hollywood lover-boy Tom Cruise. Especially given that we have been so tough and mindlessly uncompromising. It is clear that there will never be concessions by Russia with regard to Crimea. It seems to me that in order to start a dialogue, there is no other option but to dodge the topic of Crimea in public or to recognize yet that this region is part of the Russian Federation. I am very keen to see how our media and politicians will be wriggling their way out of such a quandary. Of course, the situation around the sanctions is a fairly deep and narrow political impasse into which the European Union has driven itself, and it will be hard to back out of it with a single move, no matter how positive it might look from the outside. But dialogue, in any case, is much better than political confrontation, which always carries the risk of an escalation of violence.



Crimean Tatars in Bakhchisaray. Russia. Crimea. Khan Palace on the premises of the Bakhchisaray Historical, Cultural, and Archaeological Museum-Reserve. Photo by Stanislav Krasilnikov, TASS.

Chapter 7.

CRIMEAN TATARS

Unscrupulous politicians, human rights activists, and journalists in the West attempt to use the Crimean Tatar population as a tool to indiscriminately lambaste the efforts of the Russian authorities in Crimea and promote stories about the alleged “oppression” of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula. “The Mejlis” appears to be the “mouthpiece for the interests of all Crimean Tatars.”

To investigate these reproaches, during all my travels in Crimea, solo or with various delegations, I have always paid special attention to the stance of the Crimean Tatars. As observers of the Russian presidential election on March 18, 2018, we purposefully visited areas where the Crimean Tatar population is predominant. We toured mosques, talked with believers, interviewed the director of a Crimean Tatar TV channel, and looked for opportunities to converse with many other Tatars. To what extent the accusations of harassment are just, I will try to clarify in this chapter on the basis of an essay by Astor Reigstad, who has studied the problem in depth.

Before the Crimean Tatars, the peninsula was a place inhabited by a variety of peoples since antiquity. The main ethnic groups at different times were the Taurians, Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Greeks, Goths, Huns, Romans, Proto-Bulgarians, Khazars, Pechenegs, Polovtsians, Mongol-Tatars, Italians, Circassians, and Asia Minor Turks. Starting in the 7th–8th centuries BC, Crimea was colonized by Greeks who founded their colonies

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here, in particular, the famous Chersonese, which is now located within the confines of Sevastopol. In the newly built museum, you can explore artifacts from that era. Since the 10th century AD, Russian troops, who were tussling with the Khazar Khaganate and the Byzantine Empire, which then reigned most of the peninsula, would occasionally invade their Crimean possessions, and in 988, Prince Vladimir of Kyiv and his troops adopted Christianity in Chersonese. The territory of the Kerch and Taman Peninsulas the ancient Russian Tmutarakan Princedom was established with the Kyiv Prince at the helm. This formation existed until the 11th–12th centuries.

The earliest references to the Crimean Tatar people can be traced back to the 13th century. It was at this time that this ethnic community with all the inherent characteristics of a particular nationality was formed. This nation reached its heyday under the Crimean Khanate, that is, by the mid-15th century. Around the same time, the toponym Crimea — stemming from the name of the residence of the first ruler of the Tatar ulus in the Churuk-Su River valley — replaced Tavrida, the former name of the peninsula. Later, the center of the Crimean Tatars became the city of Bakhchisaray. Today, you can still admire the recently restored Khan's Palace and medieval mosques there. Religion-wise, residents of the Khanate were mostly Sunni (one of the two major branches of Islam) and spoke a Turkic dialect, which in the 16th–17th centuries were strongly influenced by the Turkish (Ottoman) language while retaining its steppe elements. In relation to its neighbors — Poland, Lithuania, and the Grand Duchy of Moscow — the Khanate pursued an aggressive policy, embarking on predatory raids. Regular campaigns of the Crimean Tatars to seize booty and captives to be sold into slavery, as well as to collect tribute, posed a serious threat to the Russian state. The raids became more frequent after the Crimean Khanate was demoted to a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in 1478. In the steppe part of the peninsula and the Azov Sea, the Ottomans

kept the enslaved Crimean Khanate under the authority of the Girey, while incorporating the southern coast into their possessions.

By 1783, when the Crimean Peninsula was annexed to the Russian Empire, Crimean Tatars were an ethnic community with robust traditions and a distinctive culture. In the Crimean War of 1853–1856, the Western allies — England, France, and Sardinia with the Ottoman Empire fought to limit Russian influence in the Black Sea and Bosphorus, and the Crimea became one of the main battlegrounds. Then, many of the Crimean Tatars joined the allies. Since the second half of the 19th century, Crimea saw an influx of immigrants from the internal provinces of Russia and Ukraine, as well as from abroad, while Crimean Tatars increasingly relocated to Islamic Turkey. Their former lands were settled by the Christians of the Ottoman Empire: Greeks, Bulgarians, and Armenians. German colonists came from Russia or directly from Germany and Austria. These migration dynamics led to the fact that by 1897, the share of Crimean Tatars in Crimea dropped to 35.6%, in 1920 to 25.0%, and in 1939 to 19.4%.

The collapse of the former Russian Empire in 1917–1918 spawned the secession of its national provinces. In November 1917, the Crimean Tatars proclaimed their state in Crimea. It was not a khanate, of course, but a democratic republic, according to the zeitgeist. But they failed. Already in 1918, their armed detachments were defeated by the Bolsheviks, who overthrew the government established by the Qurultai, the national congress of Crimean Tatars.

In October 1921, the Crimean ASSR was formed as part of the RSFSR. As in other autonomous republics, Crimea proclaimed the principles of priority development of national communities, especially the Crimean Tatar, a policy of the so-called “Aboriginization.” This period kickstarted an active study of the history, ethnography, and culture of the Crimean Tatars and saw the opening of national schools and a Crimean Tatar theater. Dozens of newspapers and magazines



Crimean Muslims Spiritual Board Chairman Mufti Emirali Ablaev (foreground) in Gagarin Park in Simferopol during festivities to mark Crimean Tatar Flag Day. Photo by Sergey Malgavko, TASS.

were published in the Crimean Tatar language. The autonomous republic had two official state languages: Crimean Tatar and Russian.

However, things took a dramatic turn in the 1930s, when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, in presence of disruptions in grain procurement and the food crisis, initiated a forced restructuring of agriculture on a national scale. With private land ownership, including

large and small-sized farming, banned, he saw only one way out: a transition to socialist collective farming. Since 25–26 million peasant farms could not be persuaded “amicably” and in a short time, the path of forced collectivization was chosen. By March 10, 1930, according to statistics, collectivization covered 92% of peasant farms throughout the Crimean Republic. At the same time, the percentage of collectivized Crimean Tatar households was even higher than in Crimea as a whole. This coincided with massive restrictions on the rights and religious freedoms of Crimean Tatars. Many mosques and houses of worship were repurposed as warehouses or town halls, and Muslim traditions were partially outlawed. Stalin saw the Crimean Tatars as backward feudal nationalists who were reluctant to adapt to the new socialist order. Several thousand Crimean Tatars were murdered or exiled north to labor camps. This was the price the Crimean peasantry, including the Crimean Tatars, paid for the socialist reorganization of the villages. Collectivization destroyed their traditional peasant way of life. Although the following years were characterized by a marked relaxation of repressive policies and some improvement in the quality of life, these circumstances helped to shape the negative attitude of some Crimean Tatars toward the Soviet system.

This was skillfully taken advantage of by the German National Socialists when German troops occupied the peninsula in November 1941. Hitler saw Crimea as a strategic starting point for advancing into the Caucasus and Kuban. In addition, the commander of the 11th Army, Erich von Manstein, sought to secure the rear in order to focus on military operations, so he wanted to enlist the support of the Crimean Tatar population. He ordered the Wehrmacht soldiers to treat the Muslims of the peninsula with respect. In the same document, the German commander explained that the Germans “care about the help of the civilian population, especially the Tatars and Muslims who hate Russians.” An important

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role was also played by Islam, which was perceived by the Germans as an anti-Bolshevik religion, as well as the racial theories of the Nazis, in which the Crimean Tatars, being Muslims, were superior to the Slavs.

Thus, in the early weeks of the occupation of Crimea, the troops of the 11th Army showed maximum loyalty to the Muslim population of the peninsula and sought rapprochement with pro-German groups, which resulted in a part of the Tatar population of the peninsula, averse to the Soviet Union, falling under the influence of German propaganda. Already at the end of 1941, the organization of Muslim life was rekindled: to ensure the religious and cultural autonomy of Muslims and to promote the military mobilization in Simferopol, the Tatar National Committee was established, which reported to the SS and the SD.

On January 3, 1942, its first meeting was held, attended by officers of the Wehrmacht, the SD, and representatives of Tatar communities. One of the mullahs stated in his speech: "Our religion and beliefs demand us to take part in ... the holy struggle together with the Germans, for the final victory for the Tatars not only means the end of Soviet oppression but enables them to revive their religious and moral customs." This meeting of the Muslim Committee in Simferopol paved the way for the recruitment of Crimean Tatars into the German armed forces. Using masterly propaganda, the Nazis managed to coax some 20,000 Crimean Tatars into joining their troops. Later, those units were deployed by both the army and the SS to fight the guerrilla movement in Crimea.

When the Nazis retreated, those Tatars who supported them feared for their lives. The National Tatar Committee tried to persuade the Germans to take at least some Muslim leaders with them. Shortly after the liberation of Crimea by the Red Army, the leadership of the USSR decided to evict all Crimean Tatars from the territory of Crimea, citing collaboration

of some of them with the Nazis. At the same time, other nationalities were deported who, the Soviet leadership believed, could collaborate with the Nazis. The NKVD telegram to Stalin stated that 183,155 people had been deported. According to official figures, 191 died in the process. However, present-day estimates show that at least 8,000 Crimean Tatars died of starvation and disease during that trip alone.

After the newly installed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev publicly spoke out against Joseph Stalin's policies at the 1956 Party Congress, all the deported peoples, except the Crimean Tatars, Germans, and Greeks, were able to return home. By the end of the 1950s, representatives of the Crimean Tatars launched an active repatriation movement. In numerous petitions to higher authorities, both individually and collectively, Crimean Tatars pleaded to return them to their homeland. People were positive that the authorities would fix "the mistakes of cult of personality" and deviations from the "Leninist national policy," indulged in by the previous officials in relation to the Crimean Tatar people. All of the petitions had a loyal, inveigling tone to them. This restrained strategy changed with the emergence of a more radical wing of Crimean Tatars who attempted to unite with various Soviet human rights organizations. One of the most famous figures in the struggle for the repatriation of Crimean Tatars was Mustafa Dzhemilev. He was arrested several times for anti-Soviet activities. In 1967, the Decree of Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR "About the citizens of Tatar nationality, formerly residing in Crimea" was finally adopted, which removed all sanctions against the Crimean Tatars and even provided a condemnatory assessment of previous legislative acts as "sweeping accusations ... unreasonably attributed to the entire Tatar population of Crimea." However, the same decree referred to the Soviet passport regime, which tied Crimean Tatars to their place of actual residence (mostly in Uzbekistan), making it difficult for them to return to Crimea.

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When, during perestroika, in 1987, the ban on public rallies was lifted, Crimean Tatars became one of the most active nationalities. In 1988, President Mikhail Gorbachev set up a government commission, which eventually decided to abolish the ban on the change of residence for Tatars.¹⁰ Already in 1989, about 38,000 Crimean Tatars returned to Crimea. Partly because the authorities feared the pushback of the Crimean population, further demands from the Tatars were overlooked.

The Crimean Tatar national movement, expressing the nationwide aspiration to achieve full moral and legal rehabilitation and return from places of exile to their historic homeland, Crimea, was not unified at the time. The movement was represented by various “initiative groups,” whose activists created the so-called Central Initiative Group (CIG) in the spring of 1987, with Mustafa Dzhemilev playing a major role in its establishment. Earlier, in 1987, the “National Movement of the Crimean Tatars” party led by former Soviet dissident Yuri Osmanov was set up. The party was berated for leaning toward peaceful protest and cooperation with the Soviet authorities and the Communist Party. In 1989, the Congress of Crimean Tatars living in Uzbekistan created another public structure, the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement (OKND), which essentially became the political successor of the CIG.

¹⁰ On November 28, 1989, the USSR Supreme Soviet issued Decree No. 845-1[88], approving the «Conclusions and Suggestions of the Commission on the Problems of the Crimean Tatar People.» This document provided for full political rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar people and cancellation of repressive and discriminatory legal acts, as well as recognized the legal right of the Crimean Tatar people to return to the «places of historical residence and restoration of national integrity,» the review of criminal investigations into the participation in the Crimean Tatar national movement. It also provided for the restoration of the Crimean ASSR as part of the Ukrainian SSR. The task of returning to Crimea was proposed to be accomplished through organized, both group and individual relocation. The commission, headed by Gennady Yanayev, acknowledged that it was necessary to propose to the Council of Ministers of the USSR to reconsider the decree «On Restricting the Registration of Citizens in Some Localities of the Crimean Region and Krasnodar Territory» of December 24, 1987, and lift restrictions for Crimean Tatars: <http://www.ndkt.org/o-vyvodah-i-predlozheniyah-komissiy-po-problemam-sovetskih-nemtsev-i-krymsko-tatarskogo-naroda.html>.



Metropolitan Lazarus of Simferopol and Crimea, head of the Republic Sergey Aksyonov, and Crimean Muslim Mufti Emirali Ablayev at the opening of the first phase of the memorial to the victims of deportation near the railroad station Siren in the Bakhchisaray District, where Crimean Tatars were sent from the peninsula on May 18, 1944. Photo by Alexei Pavlishak, TASS.

There was a fundamental disagreement between the more conservative National Movement of the Crimean Tatars and the OKND. The movement strove for the restoration of national statehood of the Crimean ASSR according to Lenin's decree of 1921 and counted on the assistance of the party and state leadership of the USSR, while the OKND was strongly opposed to the Soviet system and relied on the creation of national statehood. The OKND swiftly adopted the

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ideology of nationalism and proceeded to take radical actions: preparation of land squatting in Crimea, confrontation with the authorities and law enforcement, etc.

Moreover, the two leaders, Osmanov and Dzhemilev, had different ideas when it came to the goals and methods of nation-building. Osmanov accused radical opponents of seeking immediate political success, which would make Crimean Tatars want to isolate themselves from the rest of the peninsula's population and could lead to civil strife. He was convinced that his OKND rivals were more power-crazed and profit-driven than concerned about the future of their people. In 1993, Yuri Osmanov, the head of the National Movement, was assassinated staged by his political opponents. The circumstances of his death are still unclear. The demise of the prominent leader led to the de facto demise of the National Movement and strengthened Dzhemilev's position.

In 1991, the OKND held a national congress (Qurultay) of Crimean Tatars in Simferopol, which convened in their homeland for the first time in 73 years. Its rulings further aggravated interethnic tension in Crimea: the Qurultay declared the ultimate goal to create a national state of the Crimean Tatars in Crimea, claimed that all subsoil and waters are the property of the Crimean Tatar people only, and actually considered all other residents of Crimea as illegal immigrants. These positions were stated in the program document, the Declaration on National Sovereignty of the Crimean Tatar People, adopted at the Congress.¹¹ In particular, it proclaimed unequivocally:

“Crimea is the national territory of the Crimean Tatar people, on which they alone have the right to self-determination as set forth in international legal acts recognized by the global community. The political, economic, spiritual, and cultural revival of the Crimean Tatar

¹¹ Declaration of National Sovereignty of the Crimean Tatar People. Adopted by the Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People on June 28, 1991. <http://www.qrim.ru/about/docs/QirimIndependence>.

people is only possible within its sovereign nation-state.” The Qurultai created a special executive body, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, which subsequently acted as the shadow nationalist government of Crimea. In 1991, Dzhemilev became the self-perpetuating chairman of the Mejlis.

By 1992, around 166,000 Tatars had already returned to Crimea. By then, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and the Tatars, like other inhabitants of the peninsula, were now under the jurisdiction of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Numerous conflicts would erupt between Crimean Tatars and the local government. In neighborhoods where Crimean Tatars compactly settled, they also had disputes with representatives of other ethnic groups in Crimea over land plots and agricultural land.

On August 24, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR proclaimed the independence of Ukraine and the “formation of an independent Ukrainian state — Ukraine.” Everyone remembers all too well what was happening at that time in Moscow, then still the capital of the USSR. On December 1, 1991, Ukraine held its first presidential election, and Leonid Kravchuk was elected the President of the Ukraine. The voters, when they were casting ballots for the President, could answer the question of whether the voters supported Ukraine’s independence. The polls did not ask the direct question about Ukraine’s secession from the USSR. The December 1, 1991 election was attended by 84.18% of eligible voters; 90.32% of them supported the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. In Crimea, people voted for autonomy as a constituent entity of the USSR, but in the end, the peninsula and Sevastopol remained part of Ukraine, albeit obtaining the status of an autonomous republic. The Crimean Tatars at the time were unanimously opposed to that referendum. The Crimean Tatar national movement banned its supporters from taking part in the vote as the leaders of the movement were trying to thwart the determination of Crimea’s status through the vote



Girls in national outfits at the Crimean Tatar national holiday Khydyrlez near the city's reservoir. The national holiday Khydyrlez, which ushers in summer and hope for a good harvest, is traditionally celebrated in Crimea in May. Photo by Sergey Malgavko, TASS.

of all the residents, a significant portion of whom had settled on the peninsula after their deportation. The OKND went on to release several statements railing against the hastily reconstituted Crimean autonomy: "Instead of restoring the Crimean Tatars' illegally abolished statehood during Stalin's regime, another Russian-speaking republic has been installed on their home turf."

Meanwhile, at the all-Ukrainian level, the national-democratic People's Movement of Ukraine became a political ally of the Mejlis, not least because of the common dissident past of the leaders of both associations. Thanks to this alliance, since the mid-1990s, the Mejlis got its representation in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine: Mustafa Dzhemilev was elected in 1998 from the People's Movement of Ukraine, and Refat Chubarov even won the majoritarian district of Crimea. On the peninsula itself, the Crimean Tatars won a dozen and a half seats in an election to the Crimean parliament in the early 1990s, and the Mejlis had a real impact on regional politics. In the run-up to the 1994 Crimean parliamentary election, the Mejlis demanded the rearrangement of the parliament into a two-chamber system, in which Tatars were to be represented by at least two-thirds of the deputies.

After Leonid Kuchma's victory in the 1999 presidential election, Kyiv, in a way, legalized the status of the Mejlis. As local experts point out, the pro-Ukrainian commitment of the Tatars may have played a role, which allowed Kuchma in the mid-1990s to mitigate the problem of Crimean separatism. At the end of 1999, Leonid Kuchma created the Council of Representatives of the Crimean Tatar People under the President of Ukraine, indicating that the head of the Mejlis was its head. In addition, members of the Mejlis entirely were incorporated into the Council.

In the 2000s, representatives of the Mejlis participated in state agencies of the autonomy at all levels, and in the executive branch up to 10%. This is despite the fact that Crimean Tatars made up only 13% of the population of Crimea.

In the 2002 parliamentary election, the Mejlis supported Viktor Yushchenko's bloc "Our Ukraine," and in 2004, the future President Yushchenko, who, thanks to this endorsement, won more votes in Crimea than in neighboring mainland regions.

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However, during Yushchenko's term, the Mejlis also had big problems. In the 18 months when Viktor Yanukovich was Prime Minister, the head of Crimean police was Anatoly Mogilev, known for his anti-Tatar agenda. Then, for the first time, the police special forces attempted, using armored vehicles and weapons, to drive Crimean Tatars off the land, calling their settlement a "squatting." Crimean Tatars were not given back their property and land confiscated in 1944, so the land issue was the most urgent for them.

In the 2010 presidential election, the leadership of the Mejlis sided with Yulia Tymoshenko, urging their countrymen to vote against Viktor Yanukovich. Mustafa Dzhemilev was sitting 12th on her Batkivshchyna (lit.: Homeland) party's candidate list. It did not take long, though, for the newly elected president to respond. Already in the summer of 2010, the official status of the Mejlis under the president of Ukraine was abolished. On August 26, Viktor Yanukovich restructured the Council of Representatives of the Crimean Tatar People, removing from it the mention of the Mejlis and its dominant role. At the same time, other Crimean Tatar organizations were created in Crimea to represent the community in the Presidential Council. Moreover, in 2011, Viktor Yanukovich appointed as prime minister of Crimea Anatoly Mogilev, an infamous opponent of the Crimean Tatars. Toward the end of Viktor Yanukovich's tenure, representatives of the Mejlis began to be forced out of government bodies, and Crimean Tatars complained of persecution by the Ukrainian authorities.

From the early days of Euromaidan, beginning in the fall of 2013, Crimean Tatars supported the anti-presidential protests. Their leaders were very active and cooperated with the Freedom Party and Right Sector, which became the driving force behind the violence in Ukraine. The majority of the Crimean population watched the events on Maidan with increasing skepticism and fear. Unlike the people of Kyiv, the residents of Crimea backed the elected local parliament almost unanimously. At the same time, the Mejlis staunchly opposed the reunification of

Crimea with Russia, mobilizing thousands of its supporters in the run-up to the regional referendum.¹² The event that caused a stir was an unauthorized rally on February 26, 2014, during which Mejlis supporters and Ukrainian nationalists attempted to seize the Crimean parliament building. As a result, 79 people were injured and two were killed.

It is worth noting that such radicalism was inherent in this public organization before. Between 1991 and 2013, Mejlis members regularly supported self-seizures of land on the peninsula and mass riots and voiced calls for the overthrow of the government by force. Few people know that on October 8, 1992, the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea adopted Resolution No. 167-1 "On the Situation in Crimea in Connection with the Unconstitutional Activities of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People and the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement," which declared the activities of the Mejlis unconstitutional, pointing to the incitement of ethnic hatred, organization of mass unrest, and calls for the violent overthrow of lawful state authorities and local self-government. However, the Ukrainian authorities did not focus on the issue of giving the Mejlis legitimate status, limiting themselves to rare calls for its registration, while using it as a separatist structure in opposition to the Russian patriotic movement in Crimea. In turn, the Mejlis members tried every now and again to demonstrate their Russophobic and anti-Russian stance, while being loyal to the Ukrainian government.

During the Maidan protests, Mustafa Dzhemilev, chairman of the Mejlis, remained in Kyiv. Because of his provocative statements and calls for acts of violence, Russia banned him from entering its territory for five years. Some of his supporters also left Crimea after its

¹² Six of the 33 members of the Mejlis objected to the pre-election boycott, advocating cooperation with the Crimean government.

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reunification with Russia. In the West, their number is estimated to be at least 20,000, while the UN cites 10,000. The real figures, according to my Crimean Tatar interlocutors, are much lower: various sources report between 600 and 800 Crimean Tatars having left the peninsula, including students who were planning to continue their academic pursuits at Ukrainian universities. Curiously, more than half of those who left Crimea after it had rejoined Russia returned and were granted Russian citizenships. The Crimean Tatars that have come back openly declare that they are disappointed in the rosy prospects promised by Ukraine.

Having relocated to Ukraine, the Mejlis continued to ramp up its anti-Russian activity with external support.¹³ With financial and informational assistance, they actively use the platforms of international organizations and the media to fake news hit jobs of various provocative statements, including on the need to maintain sanctions against Russia, on the “inevitability of Crimea’s return to Ukraine,” the “collapse of the Russian state,” and so on. In September 2015, at the initiative of the Mejlis and the Right Sector extremist organization, as well as the Aidar battalion and the Maidan Self-Defense NGO, a civil blockade of Crimea began, accompanied by road closures and terrorist activity (blowing up power transmission towers in the Kherson Region of Ukraine, which were used to supply electricity to the peninsula under the existing Russian–Ukrainian contract). As a result, the power supply and functioning of communications for all critical infrastructure Crimean facilities were disrupted in 876 localities, including those with a Crimean Tatar population. According to opinion polls, 99% of Crimean Tatars

¹³ Two days after Crimea’s reunification with Russia, on March 18, 2014, the Kyiv parliament recognized the Mejlis as the supreme representative of the Crimean Tatars and the ethnic Tatars as the indigenous people of Crimea. The Mejlis had been making this demand for 23 years to no avail, and only then it was approved for purely propaganda purposes and without any practical sense. Clearly, the demands to recognize only Crimean Tatars’ «exclusive rights,» to secure for them the status of an indigenous people of Crimea, privileges in the form of quotas for representation in government bodies will never be fulfilled and will, instead, elicit even greater aversion with the Slavic population of Crimea. And not just Slavic — Greeks, Armenians, Karaites, Bulgarians, and Germans will not condone their own discrimination, either.

on the peninsula fervently opposed such actions. In the wake of these transgressions, on April 26, 2016, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea ruled to recognize the Mejlis as an extremist organization and ban its activities in the Russian Federation in accordance with Article 9 of Federal Law No. 114-FZ “On Countering Extremist Activity” dated July 25, 2002. On September 29, 2016, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation upheld the verdict.

There are four other organizations that are associated with terrorist acts in Crimea. One of them is Hizb ut-Tahrir. The Human Rights House Foundation, funded, among others, by the Norwegian and Swiss Ministries of Foreign Affairs, keeps reporting human rights violations in Crimea. The November 2018 report titled “Crimea: Breaking the Wall of Silence” refers to “discrimination and persecution on ethnic grounds against Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars, and on religious grounds against Muslims because of extremism and participation in organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir,” and that Crimean Tatars allegedly live under constant threat of persecution as “extremists” and “terrorists.” The Human Rights House Foundation neatly omitted the fact that Hizb ut-Tahrir, as a terrorist association, was also banned in Norway, Germany, and almost all countries, including the Arab states.¹⁴ The arrest of several of its members in Crimea in October 2017 was portrayed by our Western media as a Russian abuse of power against Crimean Tatars. Importantly, in April 2017, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its preliminary ruling on Ukraine’s lawsuit against Russia for the application of the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, confirmed the complete groundlessness of accusations of “oppression” of Crimean Tatars. This fact was also corroborated by many foreign public and political figures who visited Crimea, including those from Western countries.

¹⁴ The Hizb-ut-Tahrir sect, which aims to «revive the Caliphate» through political struggle, was condemned earlier, in Ukraine, by the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, but was supported by political forces. After Crimea had rejoined Russia, the sect changed its course: in Russia, it is banned by decision of the Supreme Court.

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I think there are currently no reliable sources capable of demonstrating that the rights of Crimean Tatars are being restricted in any way. Quite the opposite is true: most Crimean Tatars have become citizens of Russia and are endowed with the same rights and obligations as any other citizen. Since reunification, the Russian government has shown more interest in over 120 minorities populating Crimea than the Ukrainian government did in the 23 years prior. As part of the Federal Targeted Program for the Development of Crimea until 2022, measures are being implemented to rehabilitate repressed peoples. The amount of funds allocated is \$180 million, which is far more than what Kyiv planned to spend on “settling the national minorities” (\$2.5 million in 2014). Since 2015, the government program “The Republic of Crimea — Territory of Interethnic Harmony” has been implemented, which funds (\$154 million) the construction of socially significant facilities for Crimean Tatars, including housing and gas supply, as well as the support of national media. Their priority problems are not political, but have a distinct social, humanitarian, and economic nature, related to the legal registration of land plots, the cultural development of the Crimean Tatar community, and ensuring inter-ethnic harmony on the peninsula. Russian authorities understand that the deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin is a tragic page in the history of Crimea. That is why one of the first steps of the Russian authorities after Crimea’s reunification with Russia was to restore historical justice. On April 21, 2014, the President of the Russian Federation signed Decree No. 268 “On measures for the rehabilitation of the Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Crimean Tatar, and German peoples and state support for their revival and development,” which implements measures to restore historical justice, political, social, and spiritual revival of peoples subjected to illegal political repression on ethnic and other grounds. In February 2018, at an expanded meeting of the Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People, the Coordinating Council of the Crimean Tatars under the Head of the Republic of Crimea was established to deal with strengthening cooperation with regional authorities.

Today, it is safe to say that Crimean Tatars have successfully integrated into Russian society: 95% of them have obtained Russian citizenship, pensioners receive payments from the Russian budget, and representatives of this nation participate in the political life of Russia and Crimea. One of them is State Duma deputy Ruslan Balbek, with whom the Norwegian delegation met in Moscow in June 2018.

During one of my trips to Crimea, we also met with the spiritual leader of Muslims of Crimea — the Crimean Mufti Haji Emirali Abliev. He told us how the relationship between the Crimean Tatars and the Russian population is developing: “Today we live in Crimea, in our homeland, and most importantly, we have a mutual understanding. We remember the dark pages of our nation’s history and pray to the Almighty that such a thing will never happen to any nation again. We must remember it and at the same time look forward to the future. May the Almighty be pleased with us,” said the Crimean Mufti. According to him, the Ukrainian officials from 1991 to 2014 made little effort to improve the situation and governed based on the “divide and rule” principle.

“Today, our mosques host memorial prayers for the victims of the deportation. Orthodox temples in Crimea and churches of other denominations commemorate the victims of the anti-human catastrophe. This shows unity, which is the main task for all of us,” the Mufti stressed. He also noted that many projects in the cultural and spiritual life of Muslims are implemented in Crimea with the assistance of the authorities. One of them is the construction of a cathedral mosque, which Muslims have been waiting for many years. “The majority of Crimean Tatars and myself do not want to go back to the times of the Ukrainian government — not now, not in ten years, not in a hundred years.” Asked to comment on the arrests of Crimean Tatars, the Mufti replied: “Crimean Tatars must live by the laws — state and Islamic.” He is convinced there are very few people who are not law-abiding and that those are mostly sectarians who

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adhere to radical branches of Islam. The Mufti concluded our conversation by saying that most Crimean Tatars want to live in peace with Christians and representatives of other religious denominations.

Of course, it is hard to know what is going on in the hearts of the Crimean Tatar people. At any rate, it is impossible to imagine that radicals, members of organizations such as the Mejlis, would be able to put into practice their nostalgic ideas about their own state like the Crimean Khanate. Neither Ukraine nor Russia could tolerate such a scenario, and an overwhelming number of Crimean Tatars would not want to support it, either. It seems that today, Russia has found a way to heal old wounds and takes the social and humanitarian interests of the Tatars seriously. In addition, Russia has the robust political and economic power to stick to this policy for many years.

Meanwhile, there are a large number of Crimean Tatars living in Turkey who, even after several generations, maintain ties with their historic homeland. One of the leaders of the Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey, Unver Sel, who has been actively engaged in this matter since 1978, confirmed to me that for a long time, the Crimean Tatar diaspora had been fed an image of Russia as an enemy.¹⁵ This public figure regularly visited the Crimean Peninsula and saw that after the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine did not help the Crimean Tatar people. For example, the housing problem remained unresolved, there was a shortage of kindergartens and schools, and the health care system was in decline. In his opinion,

¹⁵ In 2017, Unver Sel, chairman of the Federation of Crimean Tatar Cultural Associations of Turkey, founded the Turkish Foundation for the Development of Crimea in Ankara, which aims to attract investment to the Crimean Peninsula. Thanks to its activities, Crimean Tatars living abroad invest in the development of their historic homeland. Today, infrastructure projects are being implemented on the peninsula, cultural heritage sites are being reconstructed and overhauled, educational institutions, medical facilities, sports clubs, and recreation centers are being opened.

instead of providing citizens of the region with decent living conditions, the Ukrainian authorities only pitted Russian national communities against Crimean Tatars, trying to keep both sides on tenterhooks. After Crimea had joined Russia, many politicians at various levels attempted to conjure up an image of the Russian Federation as an enemy among the Crimean Tatars living both within and outside the peninsula. However, the situation is now changing: there is a tendency toward rapprochement with Russia, especially after the leadership of the antagonistic Mejlis imposed the so-called food blockade of the region and staged terrorist acts against Crimea. The Crimean Tatar population of Turkey dismissed these actions as totally unacceptable. According to Sel, the Mejlis, to which most Western reporters and human rights activists like to refer, is now a small group among the Tatars and ceases to be a serious player on the Crimean political scene. Soon, this organization will no longer be a force to reckon with, and that will drive them to the political marginalization. There are more than 30 Crimean Tatar public associations on the peninsula, including such truly influential organizations as Milli-firka (People's Party), Qirim Birligi (Crimean Unity), and Qirim (Crimea), which want nothing to do with the Mejlis.

"The Ukrainian government supports the Mejlis as its political ally," notes Unver Sel. "Its job is to exert influence over other Crimean Tatars in this way. However, they never got real rights, even in Ukraine. These days, Crimea boasts enough NGOs that adequately represent the interests of the Tatars. Under Russia, our language became official. "Millet" TV channel and "Vatan Sedasy" radio station were created. Russia fosters the preservation and development of the cultural heritage of Crimean Tatars. A compelling demonstration of it are the restoration of the Khan Palace and Grand Mosque in Bakhchisaray. Ukrainian Muslims have been waiting for a large Friday Mosque to be built in Simferopol for many years. But it was not until Crimea rejoined Russia that its construction broke ground. It is slated to be completed in 2021."

Our Crimea | Crimean Tatars

Given all of these factors, it is unfortunate that the US-spearheaded West and human rights organizations continue to abuse the Crimean Tatar community through unfounded criticism of the Russian government's national policy.

For example, employees of Amnesty International, the human rights organization, who constantly criticize the "persecution and oppression" of Crimean Tatars, have not come to Crimea since 2014. All of their information comes exclusively from Kyiv. Human rights activists from another international organization, the Human Rights House Foundation, who make absurd demands of Russia, are, too reluctant to get to the bottom of the situation. In their 36-page report, they insist that the Russian authorities "should provide full and unrestricted access to Crimea" to human rights organizations and monitoring missions by abolishing "the requirement to have a Russian Federation visa to visit Crimea."

But the thing is, no one denies them the opportunity to visit Crimea. Any foreigner with a Russian visa can easily, without any restrictions, set foot on the peninsula. Whether the so-called human rights organizations want it or not, Crimea is Russian territory under Russia's jurisdiction. Since most Western-funded human rights organizations consider Crimea not Russian, but Ukrainian territory, they refuse to apply for a visa. Of course, it is much easier to stay in Ukraine and keep "raising concerns" about not being able to visit Crimea. Of course, I am being ironic, but there is some truth in it.

I do not want to claim that the Human Rights House Foundation deliberately lies, but their presentation lacks important details, so the inexact reader gets the impression that Russia intentionally violates human rights in Crimea. And our Western media are apparently not interested in finding out the real situation, so they simply compile these reports for their articles without doing any serious investigative journalism.

Concluding my foray into the history of the Crimean Tatars and their national movement, I will share my impressions of Yevpatoria, a small resort town in the southwest of the Crimean Peninsula. It is an amazing town, bristling with colors: different architectural styles coexist here, the population is a motley crew of nations, but in high season, Yevpatoria is swarmed with holidaymakers from all over Russia and beyond. Such a place is rarely found on Earth. Yevpatoria is of the same age as the oldest cities in Europe. But that is not even the point. Surprisingly, this town is a model of confessional diversity and tolerance. In its historic center, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish ancient shrines sit in close proximity. In Yevpatoria, you can at the same time see the parishioners of the Christian temple, Muslims headed to one of the oldest mosques Juma-Jami after the call of the muezzin, Jews going to the synagogue, and representatives of the Karaites, a people with a vastly dwindling population, on the way to their religious center — kenassas. This is a tourist route dedicated to different religions, which illustrates the multi-confessionalism of Crimea. Even preaching in the ancient mosque is done in two languages: Crimean Tatar and Russian. This way non-Muslims, too, can understand the message of the prayers and addresses to the faithful. In Crimea, all peoples and religions live in peace, and the easiest way to see it is by visiting Yevpatoria, which offers this unique route with a very special flavor.



*Civil War in Yugoslavia. The city of Niš after the NATO attack. Serbia, May 7, 1999.
Photo by Alexander Nechaev, TASS.*

Chapter 8.

NATO

In 1949, NATO was created as a defensive alliance following the end of World War II. The twelve founding countries included the United States, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Luxembourg, Italy, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. During the Cold War, they were joined by Greece, Turkey, West Germany, and Spain. East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic, was part of NATO's counterpart, the Warsaw Pact, a bloc signed in 1955 and led by the Soviet Union.

Germany's reunification was sealed by the Two Plus Four Treaty, which was signed in Moscow in 1990 and entered into force on March 15, 1991. The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, on the one hand, and the four victor powers of World War II, the Soviet Union, France, the UK, and the US, on the other, partnered in the treaty. The controversial point in this treaty was whether the German Democratic Republic was allowed to become a member of NATO after reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany or whether all of Germany should remain neutral. Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader representing the USSR, advocated German reunification, but at the time of the signing, he vehemently spurned the possibility of the GDR membership in NATO. However, Gorbachev was quite easily persuaded of the benefits of German reunification because on February 7, 1990, during his two-day visit to Moscow, the United States Secretary of State James Baker assured him that NATO "would not expand an inch further eastward."

This statement, according to journalist Peter Brinkmann, is jotted in Baker's notebook but is certainly not a binding agreement. This promise by James Baker is attested today only in part, given that there is no written agreement to that effect. However, back then, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher confirmed this agreement in an interview: "We agreed that there was no intention to expand NATO's defensive zone eastward." In his book "The NATO Expansion: German Unity and Eastward Advances," Peter Brinkmann details the extremely complex interrelationships and expounds on the various meetings that took place in advance to German unification. The issue of the NATO expansion, partly unofficial, was a topic of negotiations on several occasions. Back then, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and several other Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians wanted all of Germany to join NATO but insisted that only German troops, not allied forces, be stationed in East Germany. Brinkmann writes that then-US President George H.W. Bush deliberately left Moscow on the political fringe of Europe after the end of the Cold War. The writer cites a once-classified document from the presidential library which reproduces President Bush's harsh words when discussing whether Moscow would have any influence on the future relationship of a united Germany with NATO: "To hell with that! We won, and they didn't. We can't let the Soviets snatch victory from our jaws." As we can see, today, this position from the distant past has resulted in a renewed spike in confrontation, spurred by the Ukrainian crisis, which is already taking on global proportions.

Since the end of the Cold War, despite the agreement, NATO has expanded eastward and added thirteen more countries. In 1999, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined the alliance, followed by Bulgaria, the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia in 2004. Albania and Croatia got onboard in 2009 and Montenegro in 2017. Consequently, NATO now comprises 29 states. In an April 2009 interview with the

Bild German newspaper, Mikhail Gorbachev complained about the breach of the agreement: “Kohl (former German Chancellor), US Secretary of State James Baker, and others assured me that NATO would not budge an inch eastward. The Americans supposedly didn’t like the idea, and the Germans didn’t care about it, either. Maybe they were even rubbing their hands together how great it was to outwit the Russians. But how did end it up? The Russians ended up no longer trusting Western promises...”

One can speculate about why Gorbachev did not insist on recording this agreement in writing at the time. My assumption would be that after the end of the Cold War, in which the very existence of the two powerful political blocs, each capable of using nuclear weapons, affected the strategic balance at different levels, a verbal agreement seemed sufficient. The question remains whether the US would have kept its promises to this day if they had a written treaty. The only thing we do know for a fact is that the treaty would have been between the United States and the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union disintegrated in December 1991 after the signing of the Minsk Treaty, which would have given the United States an excuse to withdraw from or declare void a possible interim treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Russia, as a successor of the Soviet Union, views NATO expansion as a threat to its own security and rightly asks who countries want to defend themselves against when they seek NATO membership. NATO’s answer does not change: it points out that every country is free and may apply for membership. This statement, on the one hand, is true. But on the other, NATO could deny such a request to Eastern European neophytes in order to balance interests; however, there has never been such a precedent. This is evidenced by NATO’s ongoing eastward expansion, which, from the outset, has been in line with the logic of

countering non-existent threats. Russia, in turn, has offered several times to cooperate on European security issues since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, but its offers have fallen on deaf ears. In particular, Vladimir Putin has advocated a close partnership, especially with Germany, since his first presidential term.

But particularly devastating and violent was the aggression against the multi-ethnic people of Yugoslavia in 1999. It was second only to World War II in fury and military might. This aggression came directly from NATO. The combat operations began in blatant violation of the UN Charter and without a UN Security Council resolution. Even back then, this showed that NATO countries, led by the United States, were on a path of total disregard for the system of International Law and international security institutions. This war was the ultimate implementation of the new NATO doctrine adopted as part of the New Strategic Concept at the 1991 Summit in Rome. Its message is very simple: NATO itself determines the necessary security measures and chooses the enemies of this security, taking upon itself the right to judge and punish any country that seems undesirable or dangerous.

The official NATO website floridly states: "Security in our daily lives is key to our well-being. NATO's purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means." At the same time, the war against Serbia had nothing to do with the American or European strongly-pronounced sense of justice for oppressed peoples. Rather with specific geopolitical considerations, as retired Bundeswehr Colonel Jochen Scholz puts it in his article: "...the geopolitical and geostrategic background to the international legal crime against Serbia was revealed to me much later, after I retired in 2000. This war had to be fought. Therefore, all serious considerations to prevent it were inherently doomed. The

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was no longer needed by the United States after the end of the East-West conflict — it had become superfluous and, as a state free of the bloc, no longer needed political and diplomatic support. Its economic model of workers' self-government stood in the way of the neoliberal transformation of the former socialist states. Above all, however, the US sought, using Sir Halford Mackinder's 'Heartland theory' (1904), ... to set the stage for attaining control over Eastern Europe, which is essentially identical to today's Russian Federation and parts of China."

Since 2016, NATO has systematically increased its military spending budget by about 6% a year, and in 2019, it reached €250.5 million for civilian purposes and nearly €1.4 billion for the military. The civilian track involves the maintenance of NATO headquarters in Brussels, while the military track includes the existing command and control systems in the European region. Former Norwegian Prime Minister and current NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said: "The world is changing, and NATO is adapting. Allies are investing in NATO to meet the challenges of our time, including cyber and hybrid threats, a more assertive Russia, and instability in the Middle East and North Africa. NATO has pledged to make sure that we continue to provide for our peoples in the most effective and fiscally responsible way." At the 2002 NATO summit, it was agreed that all member states had to increase their military budgets by at least 2% of GDP (gross domestic product). In 2017, only the United States, Greece, Estonia, Latvia, and the UK achieved this target. According to NATO, Norway is at 1.62% and Germany is at 1.24% of its GDP. In early 2019, Germany unveiled its so-called "strategic level report," which announced an expected increase in the country's spending on NATO to reach 1.5% of its GDP.

For example, by 2024, the defense budget of Germany alone is expected to increase from €43 billion to €60 billion. For comparison: the German Bundestag approved the 2019 state



Rally against NATO drills in Madrid. Photo by Marcos Del Mazo. Pacific Press / ZUMA / TASS.

budget on November 23, 2018, with a budget for the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) of approximately €18.3 billion. Thus, the total amount allocated annually by Germany to education and research is only one-third of its military spending. The Swiss historian Dr. Daniele Ganser often says in his lectures that such a two percent goal for NATO member states keeps the real costs under wraps. To people, that two percent does not seem like a big deal, but €60 billion would. In general, the link between GDP and spending on armaments is highly questionable. A good example would be Greece. This country has been

in crisis since 2008, during which time its GDP has plummeted more than 25%. Greece was actually on the brink of bankruptcy and, accordingly, could not fulfill its obligations to step up the defense spending.

The situation in Norway is somewhat different. In 2018, the defense spending totaled €5.6 billion. According to the government's plan, Norway is to buy 52 F-35 combat aircraft from American manufacturer Lockheed Martin. The purchase and running costs through 2054 are calculated to be €26.6 billion, the largest investment ever made by the Norwegian state. On June 15, 2012, the defense minister of the Norwegian Workers' Party (a social-democratic political party) said: "I have decided to make the largest state acquisition in Norwegian history: the purchase of the F-35s as our new fighter jets."

The Norwegian media glorified the agreement and called it a "Norwegian product" because the Norwegian corporation, Kongsberg Gruppen, would supply the missile system it had developed for the aircraft. Kongsberg Gruppen is a state-owned company that runs many often-unrelated production programs. At the same time, the Group's defense division, Kongsberg Defense & Aerospace AS is an efficient state-of-the-art company successful in a number of market niches even globally. But the media never mentioned the fact that this system should be installed only on models supplied to Norway. All the while, the Americans are building a new spy radar in northern Norway. This GLOBUS radar system transmits its data directly to the US command post in charge of nuclear missile launches. One can argue whether these deals helped Labor Party member Jens Stoltenberg clinch the role as the NATO Secretary General after his tenure as Norwegian Prime Minister ended. In any case, it clearly did not hurt his career, as well as Norway's participation in the attack on Libya and the deployment of new American military units in my own country...

Our Crimea | NATO

The joint defense spending of the 29 NATO adds up to a mind-boggling €1,000 billion, which is spent annually only on weaponizing NATO member states. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military spending exceeded €1,533 billion in 2017. The United States accounts for more than a third of this amount. Russia, often portrayed as a major threat to world peace, spends about €58 billion annually for military purposes. This striking difference in military budgets is an apt illustration of who the real threat to peace is today.

NATO, and above all the United States, insists that in the next few years, the member states significantly increase their military spending and, consequently, their contributions to NATO. Washington wants to reduce the cost of stationing US troops overseas by shifting them onto its European partners. European countries must pay for this “protection” by providing American troops, who are increasingly becoming well-paid mercenaries. For example, over the past seven years, Germany has spent more than €760 million on the US military presence in Germany. Almost all of Germany’s military construction budgets for its NATO partners are used to serve the United States. But America still blames the Germans for what Washington sees as insufficient defense spending. “It is simply insulting to expect American taxpayers to continue to pay for more than 50,000 Americans in Germany while Germans spend their trade surplus on their own needs,” US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell commented.

At the same time, according to the UN, the overall contribution to the relief package offered to developing countries in 2016 was about €28 billion. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) specifies: spending by donor countries on cooperation with developing countries in 2017 amounts to €132 billion. Meanwhile,

according to the figures it releases, the EU, together with its member states and its €74.4 billion (2018), is the largest humanitarian aid donor in the world. Even if you take as a reference the relatively large amount of money announced by the OECD, this amount is lower than 10% of the amount allocated to the global military needs. This means that the global community only spends €132 billion on humanitarian aid, while more than €1,533 billion is planned for military purposes. It begs the question: Do we really need these enormously hefty sums to protect us, and if so, from whom exactly do we need protection? Russia sees a threat to its security in the ever-growing NATO budget and NATO expansion. Comparing costs, however, makes one wonder: Who is really threatening whom? Who is arming against whom? Can NATO's modernization of all types of weapons and the redeployment of troops closer to the Russian border be justified solely by Russia's allegedly increased "aggression"?

The beneficiary of these considerable sums is, not least of all, the defense industry, headed for its golden era. After all, five of the six largest defense corporations in the world are based in the United States. The private arms industry makes up a large chunk of the American economy. It employs hundreds of thousands of people. The US defense behemoth, Lockheed Martin Corporation, alone had revenues of €35 billion in 2015. On its website, the company tries hard to heighten its image in Europe by listing the multiple jobs it has created by investing in Europe. Such is the cynical strategy employed by the manufacturer of weapons designed to slaughter people, the one offering overpriced flying machines. When Dwight D. Eisenhower, the former US president, left the White House in January 1961, he warned Americans in his farewell address to the nation, pointing to the growing influence of the "military-industrial complex" and the "possibility of a

disastrous concentration of power in the hands of those to whom it should not belong.” This warning still rings true today...

By its own assurances, NATO as a political-military alliance wants “to achieve peace and stability” and supposedly assists in “democracy-building.” To this end, some 20,000 NATO soldiers are currently being used “outside its area of responsibility.” But since NATO was created as a purely defensive alliance, these statements are at odds with its objectives. For example, in Afghanistan, which was struck by the US and its allies after the World Trade Center terrorist acts in 2001, NATO troops have been engaged in military operations for nearly two decades. For the average voter, the presence of, say, German soldiers in their country is explained away by “the need to protect our security in the Hindu Kush.”¹⁶ This is how former German Defense Minister Peter Struck put it. Besides, NATO runs military operations in Africa, Kosovo, the Mediterranean Sea, and Ukraine. NATO describes the cooperation with Ukraine as follows: “A sovereign, independent, and stable Ukraine that stands firm for democracy and the rule of law is key to Euro-Atlantic security.” The relationship between NATO and Ukraine dates back to the early 1990s. Since NATO approved the “Partnership for Peace” program in January 1994 and Ukraine was the first CIS country to sign the relevant framework document, and in 1997 initialed the Charter on a Special Partnership with NATO. By doing so, it, as a matter of fact, violated the provisions of the country’s non-aligned status and neutrality proclaimed in the Declaration of State Sovereignty, adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR on July 16, 1990. The 2004 Military Doctrine of Ukraine for the first time emphasized the need to change Ukraine’s legal framework to meet NATO standards. The climax came

¹⁶ The Hindu Kush is a mountain system mostly located in Afghanistan.

in early April 2008, when President Viktor Yushchenko attempted in Bucharest to have a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) formalized for Ukraine. However, representatives of Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Belgium were against it at the time. Two years later, the Verkhovna Rada passed a law “On the foundations of domestic and foreign policy.” It proclaimed Ukraine’s non-aligned status, which effectively meant its refusal to join NATO. Nevertheless, the law stated that an important goal of its foreign policy was the accession to the European Union. It is worth noting that the Ukrainian leadership was constantly double-dealing: while negotiating on cooperation with the European Union and NATO, it sought to consolidate the existing relations with the Russian Federation.

Following the February 2014 coup, the new nationalist Ukrainian leadership set out to join NATO, radicalizing this aspiration by breaking off military and economic cooperation with Russia and starting large-scale combat operations in Donbass. In December 2014, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine passed a bill submitted by President Petro Poroshenko that revoked Ukraine’s non-aligned status. In June 2017, the Rada amended legislation to declare NATO membership as one of Ukraine’s top foreign policy priorities. In 2019, constitutional amendments entered into force that enshrined a strategic path toward full membership for Ukraine in the European Union and NATO. Since 2015, four foreign military missions — American, multinational, British, and Lithuanian — have been consistently deployed to Ukraine. The US military officially supports the Ukrainian army and has even decorated soldiers of the Ukrainian armed forces who fought in eastern Ukraine. In December 2017, US President Donald Trump decided to ship lethal weapons to Ukraine, a civil war-torn country. Annual US military aid to Ukraine averages \$250 million.

By aggravating the situation in Donbass time and again, the Ukrainian leadership tried to directly involve Russia in the conflict to demand the entry of NATO troops into the war zone. Given all these factors, one can understand the anxiety of Russia's political and military leadership.

NATO's commentary on whether Russia has the right to demand a 100-percent guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO looks odd. NATO's official website makes it clear that Russia cannot demand such a guarantee and that every country is free to request membership in NATO. No one disputes this statement. Nevertheless, for the sake of peace and stability in Europe and the world, the alliance could have reacted differently and made some concessions to Russia on this issue. But NATO does not. That being said, the official reasons for Ukraine's inability to join the North Atlantic Alliance are well known. These include the unresolved internal armed conflict in Donbass, the unresolved territorial dispute with Russia over Crimea, and the utter non-compliance of the country's armed forces with NATO standards. Finally, there is no unanimity among NATO member states on this issue. And according to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, all NATO members must unanimously approve the candidacy of the state joining the Alliance. It is also necessary to understand that there are other, much more important factors. Ukraine's accession to NATO is not just a further deterioration of relations with Russia — it is a path to direct confrontation. However, it does not seem that Jens Stoltenberg, as NATO Secretary General, was going to initiate a constructive conversation with Russia. Stoltenberg, who in his college days fiercely fought for Norway's withdrawal from the alliance and against nuclear weapons, has made a U-turn, becoming Washington's obedient minion. In a recent interview, he recalled that the alliance now has five times as many aircraft performing missions as it did a year ago and more ships in the Baltic and Black Seas. At the same time, Stoltenberg

cautiously urged not to disrupt relations “especially in such difficult times as now” in order “to avoid the crisis devolving into something worse and the emergence of larger conflicts due to misunderstandings.”

If NATO were a defensive alliance, it would limit itself to protecting its member states in Europe. Instead, however, it is expanding its influence and waging military conflicts in many parts of the world, increasingly becoming an alliance of world interventionists.



*Rebels during the transfer of bodies of dead Ukrainian soldiers at the airport.
Ukraine, Donetsk, January 22. Photo by Mikhail Sokolov, TASS.*

Chapter 9.

DONETSK PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

This book mainly discusses the events in Crimea in 2014 and their consequences repercussions. The war in eastern Ukraine and the separation of the two self-proclaimed, Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics play an important role in understanding the context, so in this chapter, I want to focus specifically on the events in Donbass.

The Maidan protests and subsequent illegal seizure of power in Kyiv led to the opposition not only from the Crimean population but also from the residents of eastern Ukraine, predominantly Russian-speaking regions, Luhansk and Donetsk. Since I visited the Donetsk People's Republic several times in 2018 and 2019, I want to limit my description to just this region.

Before 1917, the city of Donetsk, formerly Yuzovka, was a small settlement with a metallurgical plant and a population of 50,000. Before the Russian revolution, Yuzovka never attained the status of a city. Here, in the late 19th century, the development of rich deposits of Donetsk coal began and steel mills were quickly erected, consuming large quantities of hard coal on-site. The railroad also sprawled rapidly, allowing coal and metal to be exported outside of Donbass.

During the Soviet era, Donbass, or Donetsk Basin, part of which geographically belongs to present-day Russia, was an important industrial hub of the Soviet Union, one of the key centers of coal mining and metallurgy.



Mourning rally and the candle-lit ceremony at the site of the shelling of a bus stop in the Bosse neighborhood. Ukraine. Donetsk, January 24. Photo by Alexei Slavny, TASS.

The leading sectors of the economy of Donetsk, as before, remain the coal industry, mining engineering, coke chemistry, chemistry, and agriculture.

Terrain-wise, Donbass is mostly flat (up to 200 meters above sea level), pierced by ravines and gullies, with small copses. In and around the major cities, the outlines of waste heaps, mine buildings, the black contours of head fires in the blazing sunset clouds, furnace chimneys, and

shop towers dominate the skyline. Behind them, barely visible through the haze are mining villages with one-story cabins under hip roofs of asbestos slate. Wind whistling in my face. That is the Donbass I saw; in my mind, such is its real face.

The city of Donetsk, razed during World War II, was planned and rebuilt according to Soviet standards in the postwar period. The sprawl of wide roads and residential neighborhoods with typical residential neighborhoods is striking. I would like to emphasize that Donetsk has always been one of those cities in Ukraine where Russian is the language of choice. This is also confirmed by the surveys, including those conducted before the outbreak of the military conflict. In 2011, 87% of the polled confirmed that they speak Russian, and Russian only, at home.

Summer Donetsk is a very green city. Locals call their city “the city of a million roses.” In the summer, I witness a real blaze of scarlet roses here. Roses in Donetsk have almost a cult status and are the pride of local residents who, despite the military conflict, strive to keep green areas, as a symbol of life’s victory over the horrors of war.

Between 1910 and 2014, Donetsk’s population soared from 48,000 to almost a million. According to official data from the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), the number of residents has almost halved since 2014. All in all, about 2.3 million people currently live in the People’s Republic on an area of 8,600 square kilometers. The ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, in which the so-called (in the West) pro-Russian separatists are fighting for the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, broke out in February 2014.

The triggers of the events in eastern Ukraine, the dynamics of the social movement, and the peak periods are similar to those of Crimea, although the situation and starting points are different. The population in the eastern parts of the country — the Russian-speaking Luhansk

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and Donetsk Regions — also feared what might happen in their regions after the nationalists and fascists seized power in Kyiv. Popular memory is marred with

TV footage of brutal violence on Maidan and the burning Trade Unions Building in Odessa, where Russian movement activists were burned alive. Judging by the fact that the local police and firefighters did not react to what was happening, we can assume that the victims were in demand. There is live footage from the First Odessa TV city channel showing nationalists walking with weapons toward Kulykovo Pole, the seat of the Trade Unions Building, and hunting people afterward... Then, Ukrainian radicals and junta sympathizers armed themselves and struck not at representatives of the Yanukovich regime, but at civilian activists who voiced their disagreement. Feeling complete impunity, the radicals were elated. The character of the followers of the fascist collaborationists-Banderovites got imprinted in the declarations, slogans, and actions of Right Sector and other radical fighters, in their patches with SS runes, flags with fascist symbols, Nazi “Heil!” salutations, and in slogans that resembled those of Nazis. TV footage depicting Ukrainian guerillas were even aired on German mainstream news programs but did not elicit condemnation from commentators.

The division of Ukraine's population into East and West is, however, far from new. Ukraine has long been split into western and eastern parts in its political preferences. One can mention the a more fundamental, cultural, and value-based split of the Ukrainian nation, which is deeply rooted in history. But with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, all these problems resurfaced. The new Ukrainian politicians began to implement forced Ukrainianization. People living in the eastern regions felt like outsiders. Whereas Western Ukraine, once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, instinctively aspired to Europe, Eastern Ukraine was firmly tied to Russian culture and history. But one must know and understand the mentality of the Donbass residents, who have survived all waves of Ukrainianization and considered themselves Russians

and at the same time patriots of their land, part of historical Novorossia. The aggression of radical Ukrainian nationalism reignited the historical consciousness of the inhabitants of Donbass, awakening their historical memory.

What do we really know about Donbass and the people who live there and have been resisting the Kyiv authorities for years?

We usually hear in the West that it is Russia that is waging a war against Kyiv to destabilize Ukraine using mercenaries and its own military. However, our media rarely discuss the causes of the conflict in southeastern Ukraine. I tried to figure out why the press would not cover this problem widely enough, would not draw the public's attention in the West to the urgency of the situation.

As I see it, one reason may be that the two unrecognized republics of Donbass are very skeptical of the activities of Western journalists for fear of being portrayed as the perpetrators of the conflict. Secondly, these territories are still an active war zone, where shelling is everyday life and the fragile cease-fire is being shattered. The third motive, however, is just as obvious: Western media themselves refrain from going there for political reasons. And I experienced this personally in Norway when my planned trip to Donbass with representatives of the Norwegian media was canceled at the last moment by the editor-in-chief of the same media. Yet there are many families living in Europe who regularly visit their relatives in these regions and enter the DPR or LPR (Luhansk People's Republic) through Ukraine, across the front line. It is also possible to access them via Russia. To do this, you must have a Russian multi-visa and at least a smattering of Russian, as foreigners, including European tourists, are rare at checkpoints. Thus, the Western media could very well glean reliable information from the conflict zone if only they wanted to, but apparently, they have no interest in doing so.



*Resident of the Petrovsky District, which was shelled from Ukrainian army positions.
Ukraine, Donetsk, November 12. Photo by Mikhail Pochuev, TASS.*

Chapter 9.1.

THE DONBASS CRISIS AS IT UNFOLDED

In this regard, I would like to give you a timeline of the events that led to the armed conflict in Donbass, based on two books: “Chronicle of Alive: 2014–2016” and “DPR: A Chronicle of Fates.” I received both books during my meetings with Natalia Nikonorova, the foreign minister of this unrecognized republic. They help to delve into the essence of the conflict and even further narrow the question: to understand what has been happening and is happening in Donetsk, to recall the causes of the conflict, to give a brief timeline, and to look at the main developmental vectors. It goes without saying, the books represent the opinion of the government of the Donetsk People’s Republic. Therefore, it is up to you to decide whether you trust these words. At any rate, they allow us to mold a point of view different from that often pitched by the Western media.

The preface to one of them reads: “In the spring of 2014, war came to the peaceful region of Donbass. Fear, horror, pain, anguish, and destruction have become commonplace for everyone in this densely populated and developed region. For more than two years now, the Ukrainian Armed Forces have continued shelling the region with large-caliber artillery. The Ukrainian authorities keep up their fratricidal war and go on bombing civilians in the Donetsk People’s Republic. The current Ukrainian government is pursuing a strategy of extermination. This book is intended to show a true picture of what has happened in Donbass and become a

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kind of appeal to the international community, to draw its attention to the situation in the Donetsk People's Republic, where millions of citizens only hope for peace and tranquility..."

Besides offering the timeline of the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic, the book documents the terrible crimes of the Ukrainian authorities against the people of Donbass, who are still going through rough times. The book concludes with an appeal from the residents of Donbass to the global community, in which the people request an inquiry into every violation of International Law against the residents of the region.

Let me remind the reader that mass anti-government protests began in the southeastern regions of Ukraine in late February 2014. They were largely a pushback of the local population to the forcible change of power in the country and the ensuing attempt by the Verkhovna Rada to repeal the law granting Russian the status of a regional language. Donbass became the center of confrontation between pro-Russian citizens and the authorities in Kyiv. You can find out how the conflict in southeastern Ukraine unfolded from the chronicle of events I compiled based on materials published in Donetsk.

JANUARY 9, 2014.

The protesters gather at the monument to Taras Shevchenko in downtown Donetsk and raise their voices against fascism in Ukrainian politics.

JANUARY 19, 2014

Anti-Maidan supporters in Donetsk participate in mass demonstrations against the coup d'état in Kyiv.

JANUARY 22, 2014

Further rallies in support of incumbent Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich are held at the monument in downtown Donetsk.

JANUARY 25–27, 2014

Miners, Cossacks, and Donbass veterans descend at the Donetsk Regional Administration to protect it from “thugs.”

FEBRUARY 11, 2014

A new public movement “Defense of Donetsk” is inaugurated in the capital of Donbass. It is not registered and so far, exists only in the form of two social media groups, totaling over a thousand members. Young people support the constitutional order of Ukraine and also advocate the prohibition of extremist movements. They chose a St. George’s ribbon pinned to their clothes as their symbol.

FEBRUARY 27, 2014

A tent camp is set up on Lenin Square. The “Defenders of the Monument” and opponents of the fascists, who, in their words, “got entrenched in Kyiv,” are gathering there.

FEBRUARY 28, 2014

Pavel Gubarev, commander of the Donbass People’s Militia, came to a session of the Donetsk City Council with his supporters, where he proclaimed an “ultimatum from the Donbass People’s Militia to deputies,” proposing that the government in both Kyiv and the Donetsk Region be considered illegitimate.

MARCH 1, 2014

More than 7,000 people take part in a rally at the Lenin monument in memory of the fighter killed in Kyiv who served at Berkut, a special police unit under the territorial departments of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, and in support of the Crimean government’s policy. Thousands march from Lenin Square to the Donetsk Regional State Administration; on its steps, Gubarev calls for a referendum and new elections.

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MARCH 3, 2014

Over a thousand people participate in a rally near the Donetsk Regional State Administration. Pavel Gubarev reads out an ultimatum to the deputies demanding that the new parliament and government in Kyiv remain unrecognized. In the afternoon, demonstrators take over the small meeting hall on the second floor of the building. Pavel Gubarev is arrested.

MARCH 15, 2014

At a rally on Lenin Square, protesters demand recognition of Russian as an official language. At the end of the rally, the protesters flock to the Ukrainian Security Service building and demand the release of Pavel Gubarev. After talking to the head of the regional SBU branch, the protesters attempt to storm the building.

MARCH 23, 2014

Thousands of protesters on Lenin Square are calling for a referendum on the status of the Donetsk Region on May 25. In addition, an address by the acting head of the Republic of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, is read from the stage for the residents of southeastern Ukraine. He says that "in the context of Ukraine's decayed statehood, the right of people to self-determination and independent resolution of issues in the interests of all their regions, rather than the myths of nationalists, comes to the fore."

APRIL 6, 2014

Activists storm the building of the Donetsk Regional State Administration and hoist the Russian flag. They begin to erect makeshift barricades of used tires, scrap metal, and sandbags.

APRIL 7, 2014

Activists of the Donetsk Resistance declared the creation of a new sovereign state: the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). The decision was adopted and unanimously supported by the

people's delegates gathered in the session hall of the Donetsk Regional Council. The People's Council of the newly created Donetsk People's Republic (historically, the Donetsk Republic already existed) has taken a number of decisions. Deputy Vladimir Makovych proclaims the sovereignty and independence of the Donetsk People's Republic.

These decisions were supported by a majority of the delegates. The decision on this issue was met with a round of applause, with the audience chanting "Russia!", "Putin!", "Donbass!" Then, an appeal from the Presidium of the Donetsk People's Republic to Vladimir Putin to support the political protest of the residents of Donbass against the Kyiv junta was read out.

APRIL 10, 2014

Denis Pushilin told journalists about the creation of the People's Army of the DPR. Protesters near Ukrainian military bases urge soldiers to join the people.

APRIL 13, 2014

The SBU begins operations against supporters of the Donetsk People's Republic in Sloviansk (about 150 kilometers north of Donetsk). The State District Administration of Sloviansk established a volunteer militia mostly comprised of miners, wearing helmets and carrying crowbars. On April 13, Ruben Avanesyan, a 29-year-old activist of the Donbass militia, an Armenian native, died from a gunshot wound in Sloviansk. The media put forward different versions of Avanesyan's death. According to one account, unidentified people tried to stop his car at a checkpoint near Sloviansk, but he did refuse to pull up, after which they opened fire on him. Avanesyan became the first fatality among the people's militia of the Donetsk People's Republic.

APRIL 14, 2014

Acting Ukrainian President Oleksandr Turchynov announced the beginning of an anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine. The text of the decree is posted on the acting president's website.

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APRIL 16, 2014

Members of the "Oplot" (lit.: Stronghold) organization led by Alexander Zakharchenko occupy the building of the Donetsk City Administration and demand a referendum on the status of the Donetsk Region scheduled for May 11. A MIG-29 fighter jet of the Ukrainian Armed Forces flies over the city.

APRIL 24, 2014

The Ukrainian government's so-called anti-terrorist operation begins in Sloviansk.

MAY 1, 2014

Lenin Square in Donetsk hosts May 1 (Labor Day) rallies.

MAY 2, 2014

Clashes occurred in central Odessa between Anti-Maidan activists on one side and fans of the Odessa and Kharkiv soccer clubs, as well as Euromaidan activists on the other. By evening, the unrest had extended to Kulykovo Pole, where supporters of unitary Ukraine smashed up the Anti-Maidan camp and set fire to the Trade Unions Building, using Molotov cocktails. As a result of an arson attack by Ukrainian nationalists, nearly 50 Anti-Maidan protesters were burned alive, and more than 200 were injured. Ukrainian presidential candidate Yulia Tymoshenko arrived in Odessa. She dubbed the burning of people in Odessa a defense of administrative buildings, and the attack by radicals on the Anti-Maidan camp a peaceful demonstration.

MAY 3, 2014

After the dramatic events in Odessa, many volunteers in Donetsk joined the people's militia.

MAY 5, 2014

The Ukrainian authorities decided to temporarily close the checkpoints on the border with Crimea because, on April 25, the checkpoints in Crimea became Russian.

In the Donetsk Region, the outskirts of Sloviansk, near the village of Semyonovka, saw an armed clash. According to the militia headquarters, 10 people ended up killed and several dozen wounded.

Ukrainian servicemen used army aviation against the militia in Sloviansk.

MAY 8, 2014

Deputies of the Supreme Council of the People's Republic scheduled the referendum for May 11.

MAY 9, 2014

Oleksandr Turchynov, appointed by the Verkhovna Rada as acting president of Ukraine, addressed the nation on the occasion of Victory Day. He said that the state will strive to provide veterans with decent living conditions and protect their respect in society.

Victory Day events are held in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Sloviansk, and the Donetsk region, as well as in western Ukraine. Rallies of supporters of federalization are taking place in Donetsk and Luhansk.

In Mariupol, the building of the city police department was destroyed by fire after the security forces tried to wrestle control over it. The Donetsk Regional Administration, citing medical services in Mariupol, reported that seven people died and 39 were rushed to hospital during the operation. Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said that about 20 militiamen were killed during a special operation. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry reported the death of the deputy commander and machine gunner of the territorial defense battalion. Later, the Donetsk administration reported that the death toll from the Ukrainian army's May 9 special operation in Mariupol reached nine, with 42 wounded.

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MAY 11, 2014

The day of the referendum on the status of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine. Despite provocations by Ukrainian troops, 74.87% of voters turn out to the polls. State independence was supported by 89.7% of the participants. In Sloviansk, polling stations opened on time, despite the shelling of checkpoints on the outskirts of the town. Vasily Nikitin, a spokesman for the army of the southeast, said that the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic, whose independence was supported by residents of the region at the May 11 referendum, does not intend to participate in elections for president of Ukraine, but intends to apply to the United Nations for international recognition.

MAY 17, 2014

Members of the Supreme Council (parliament) of the proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) approved on Friday the candidacy of the prime minister, his deputies, and key ministers. Voting on a number of ministerial appointments was postponed until May 19. Alexander Boroday becomes prime minister of the DPR government. Ferocious clashes are raging at the Donetsk airport. Igor Strelkov, Minister of Defense of the Donetsk People's Republic, urges people to join the people's militia.

MAY 24, 2014

A new flag has been hoisted on the rooftop of the Donetsk City Hall. Donetsk hosts a congress of people's representatives of the southeast. Representatives of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics arrive.

MAY 26, 2014

Ukrainian security forces have resumed the active phase of the special operation in eastern Ukraine, which was suspended on election day, Deputy Prime Minister Vitaliy Yarema said,

adding that the security forces will conduct the operation “until not a single” militiaman remains on Ukrainian territory.

The Donetsk airport remains an active battleground all day. The Ukrainian security forces used aviation and performed aerial bombing strikes. The fighting in Donetsk resulted in deaths of about a hundred militiamen and civilians. The press service of the Donetsk City Council reported that 40 people were killed during a special operation by the security forces near the airport. The Ukrainian army once again used a Mi-24 helicopter with UN insignia in the battle for the Donetsk airport. The militia retreated deep into the city after fighting at the airport. They fortified themselves in the buildings of the regional administration, the regional SBU, the administration of the SBU of the Kuybyshev District, and in a number of other facilities. Heavy fighting took place between Ukrainian armed forces and DPR militia for the airport and around the Putilovsky Bridge. The vicinity of the Donetsk railroad station was also attacked.

JUNE 1–3, 2014

Fighting between the Ukrainian army units and the people’s militia reactivated on the outskirts of Sloviansk. Shootings occurred in the area of Slavkurort, Vostochny, and Semyonovka villages. There were also several volleys of Ukrainian artillery from Mount Karachun on the outskirts of Sloviansk. Two civilians of Sloviansk were killed and several people were wounded when the city was shelled by howitzers of the Ukrainian army. Militia commander Igor Strelkov once again addressed residents begging them to flee the city.

JUNE 2, 2014

Ukrainian security forces carried out two airstrikes in Luhansk. The first target was the regional administration building in the city center. The second airstrike, according to the self-proclaimed Luhansk People’s Republic, was aimed at a checkpoint near the village of

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Luhanska. The authorities of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic reported that eight civilians were killed and 28 wounded as a result of an airstrike on the regional administration building. According to the Luhansk People's Republic, cluster bombs, which are prohibited by international convention, were used in the shelling of the Luhansk administration building. Two people were killed during the shelling of the Krasny Liman Railway Hospital by the Ukrainian armed forces, and the hospital's chief surgeon sustained a severe shrapnel wound to the head.

JUNE 5, 2014

Russian Permanent Representative to the OSCE Andrei Kelin announced that, at the meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Russia raised the issue of banning the use of heavy weapons and aircraft by the Ukrainian armed forces during the punitive operation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The G7 leaders labeled the actions of Ukraine's armed forces operating in the country's southeast as "reserved" and called for the early adoption of a "memorandum of peace and harmony."

JUNE 7, 2014

Petro Poroshenko, who won the snap presidential election, took the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and was sworn in as the fifth president of independent Ukraine. The inauguration took place at a solemn meeting of the Verkhovna Rada, the country's parliament. "I want peace and I will achieve the unity of Ukraine, so I begin my work by proposing a peace plan," Poroshenko said.

Earlier, Poroshenko demanded that before his June 7 inauguration, the armed forces complete the "cleansing" of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where the people's republics proclaimed in early April had declared their independence at the May 11 referendum. In his address, the

new Ukrainian president ordered that the militiamen lay down their weapons and promised that he would firmly tell the Russian leadership: “Crimea is ours, and there can be no compromise with anyone on this issue.”

JUNE 23, 2014

Negotiations on the settlement of the conflict begin in Donetsk. They are attended by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, and the DPR.

JUNE 24, 2014

Deputies of the People’s Council of the DPR together with the Luhansk People’s Republic vote for a joint constitution.

Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic Alexander Boroday organized a news conference where he explained how the ceasefire agreement was being observed.

According to him, the negotiations with the contact group were a bluff from the very outset. He was on record as saying that there was no cease-fire, “has not been and, apparently, will not be.” The head of the DPR government accused Ukrainian authorities of sending a contact group to the negotiations that had no grip on the situation. “The warfare continues, and we have no choice but to fight,” Boroday noted. In his opinion, Kyiv had tried to pretend that there were some agreements to resolve the conflict in order to bide its time until June 27, when Ukraine was scheduled to sign the economic part of the Association Agreement with the European Union.

“It was a classic bluff... We know that Kyiv is planning an assault on Donetsk and Sloviansk. We want to relay to the global public that they lie all the time,” the prime minister of the DPR said indignantly.

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JUNE 29, 2014

During the fighting near the Donetsk airport, cameraman Anatoly Klyan of Channel One Russia was fatally wounded. Alexander Boroday emphasized: "We strongly condemn these illegal actions and call on the international community to influence the Ukrainian government to stop the war against journalists."

JULY 5, 2014

A column of militia armored vehicles entered Donetsk. According to the militia, a regrouping took place: some forces from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk left for Horlivka, and some headed for Donetsk.

JULY 6, 2014

Denis Pushilin, chairman of the Supreme Council of the DPR, tweeted that the militia of the Donetsk People's Republic had no intention to surrender.

Earlier, Denis Pushilin stated that for the militia, the fighting in eastern Ukraine was comparable to World War II and the DPR would not surrender.

JULY 8, 2014

The Petrovsky District of Donetsk was attacked by the Ukrainian Air Force.

JULY 12, 2014

According to the Donetsk People's Republic, 30 civilians, including a 10-year-old child, were killed when the Ukrainian army shelled the district center of Maryinka in the Donetsk Region. A feed mill, a dairy plant, a former tire factory, and a filtration plant were damaged. Maryinka was cut off from water supplies. The bombs also hit five-story apartment blocks. Local residents almost completely abandoned Maryinka or were hiding in basements. A

string of cars with refugees fleeing the shelling is seen on the way out of the district center toward Donetsk.

Clashes between the DPR forces and the Ukrainian enforcers resumed during the day in the southwest of Donetsk; the Ukrainian army shelled the town of Ilovaysk, 47 kilometers from Donetsk, in the southwest.

JULY 15, 2014

A Ukrainian air strike was launched against the town of Snizhne in the Donetsk Region. At 6:35 a.m. (7:35 a.m. Moscow Time), the rescue service of the region received information about the collapse of an apartment block in the town of Snizhne. Twelve apartments were destroyed. As of 5:00 p.m., 11 people had been killed and eight wounded. One child was among the wounded.

The spokesman for the Information Center of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, Andriy Lysenko, said that he did not know whose plane bombed the town of Snizhne.

Representatives of the DPR reported that planes of the Ukrainian Air Force had launched an airstrike on the town of Shakhtarsk in the Donetsk Region.

JULY 17, 2014

In the evening, a Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777, which was headed from Amsterdam (Netherlands) to Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), crashed in eastern Ukraine. There were 298 souls on board, including 15 crew members. No survivors.

The Kyiv authorities blamed the crash on the militiamen, who stated that they had no technology to bring down the plane at an altitude of 10,000 meters and called the incident a

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provocation by the Kyiv authorities. In addition, according to witnesses, there was a Ukrainian Air Force attack aircraft in the area of the crash, which attacked the passenger plane.

JULY 23, 2014

The Supreme Council of the DPR elects Boris Litvinov as chairman to replace Denis Pushilin.

JULY 27, 2014

The shelling of Donetsk and other cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Ukrainian army continued into the night. According to the militia, the Ukrainian army launched artillery strikes on the towns of Horlivka and Avdiivka in the Donetsk Region. Thirteen people were killed in Horlivka, including two children. In Avdiivka, according to the militia, five people were killed and several dozen civilians were wounded.

In the evening, Horlivka was hit with another strike from the Grad multiple rocket launchers.

JULY 29, 2014

Donetsk came under artillery fire on the night of July 29, with the Leninsky and Kyivsky districts severely damaged.

In the afternoon, the center of Donetsk was shelled for the first time. The militiamen claimed that the army tried to hit the former building of the regional SBU, which the militiamen had repurposed as one of their main headquarters. In the evening, artillery fire resumed in Donetsk. According to official data, as a result of the shelling of the city on the night of July 29, one person was killed, and in the afternoon of July 29, two persons were killed and 15 others received injuries of varying degrees of severity.

Artillery shelling was taking place in Horlivka throughout the day. As a result of the shelling of Horlivka over the past 24 hours, 17 people were killed, including three children, and 43 other

civilians were wounded. In the aftermath of these tragic events, a three-day mourning period was declared in the city beginning on July 28.

AUGUST 4, 2014

The first battles took place in the suburbs of Donetsk. The DPR militia reported that the Ukrainian army brought hundreds of armored vehicles and artillery, dozens of multiple rocket launchers (Uragan, Smerch, and Grad), and Tochka-U missile systems to Donetsk.

AUGUST 5, 2014

After the shelling and failure of the Seversky Donets–Donbass canal pumping station, Donetsk was left without drinking water. The Tekstilshchiki District in Donetsk came under artillery fire. Three civilians were killed. Schools and hospitals were turned to rubble. At night, the Ukrainian army conducts airstrikes in the Kalininsky District.

AUGUST 6, 2014

Because of the bombardment, most residents of Donetsk were stripped of cellular phone service.

AUGUST 7, 2014

Chairman of the Council of Ministers Alexander Boroday voluntarily resigns. Alexander Zakharchenko, one of the leaders of the NGO “Oplot” created in 2010, was proposed for this office. Oplot’s main tasks are financial, legal, social, and moral assistance to the families of police officers killed in the line of duty, military personnel who have suffered in battle and, because of age or life circumstances, are unable to take care of themselves. Another activity of Oplot was the care of monuments to heroes of the Great Patriotic War and preventing the glorification of the Ukrainian nationalist organizations OUN-UPA.

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AUGUST 10, 2014

The DPR militia repelled a Ukrainian army's attack on Ilovaysk, a town 35 kilometers east of Donetsk. Nine enemy armored vehicles were destroyed.

Luhansk, a city in eastern Ukraine where a special operation was taking place, had been without electricity, water supply, and both mobile and landline communications for more than a week. Municipal authorities repeatedly spoke of a critical situation on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe. According to local residents, it was almost impossible to leave the city.

AUGUST 11, 2014

US President Barack Obama and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi had a telephone conversation in which they condemned the Russian "meddling" in the Ukraine events, by which they meant Moscow's intention to provide humanitarian aid to residents of southeastern Ukraine, and vowed to introduce new sanctions against Russia if aid was sent without coordination with Kyiv.

AUGUST 14, 2014

Massive shelling of residential areas in the Petrovsky and Voroshilovsky Districts of Donetsk continued. Nine civilians were killed.

Militia forces repelled an offensive by the Ukrainian army near Yenakiyev and Pisky, as well as on Khartsyzsk and Zugres settlements. The fighting in Zugres claimed 15 lives, including those of three children, and injured 19 people.

Fierce combat raged on in the areas of Krasny Sulin and Antratsit. The Ukrainian army lost more than 30 people here.

AUGUST 15–16, 2014

On the night of August 15, hostilities occurred in the Petrovsky and Leninsky districts of Donetsk. According to the City Council, eight civilians were wounded and 11 civilians killed during the day in Donetsk. In the afternoon, the army launched a new artillery strike on Donetsk.

Residents of Donetsk videotaped the bombing with ammunition that resembles internationally banned white phosphorus shells.

AUGUST 24, 2014

The Kalinin Hospital was shelled. Destroyed and captured Ukrainian army equipment is on display on Lenin Square.

AUGUST 26, 2014

After a counterattack by the DPR militia, Ukrainian soldiers are surrounded near Ilovaysk. This operation is now referred to as the Ilovaysk Pocket. Militiamen gain control over the legendary Savur-Mohyla mound.

SEPTEMBER 5, 2014

After DPR and LPR forces launched a large-scale counterattack in August, complicating the situation for the Ukrainian military, the idea of a trilateral meeting in Minsk (OSCE–Russia–Ukraine) resurfaced as a relevant option for the Ukrainian authorities. On August 26, Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko met in Minsk, and on September 3, they had a telephone conversation in which they discussed a plan to resolve the situation in Donbass.

On September 5, 2014, at the Minsk President Hotel, the Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group (the Minsk Protocol) was signed, which, in particular, refers to the ceasefire in the two eastern regions of Ukraine. The full name of the document is the

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Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group on joint steps aimed at the implementation of the Peace Plan of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and the initiatives of Russian President Vladimir Putin. On the Russian side, the protocol was signed by Mikhail Zurabov, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to Ukraine; the Ukrainian signatory was former President Leonid Kuchma, who had a mandate from the country's leadership; and on the OSCE side, it was signed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini. Once the document was signed, the ceasefire went into effect on the same day at 6:00 p.m. local time. At the time of the Protocol signing, rebels from the DPR and LPR controlled a territory of 16,000 square kilometers and 4.5 million people.

ROADMAP OF THE PROTOCOL:

- ensure an immediate bilateral ceasefire;
- ensure monitoring and verification by OSCE of the observation of the ceasefire regime; – implement decentralization of power, including by enacting the Law of Ukraine on the interim status of local self-government in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Law on Special Status);
- ensure permanent monitoring on the Ukrainian-Russian state border and verification by OSCE, along with the establishment of a security area in the border regions of Ukraine and the Russian Federation;
- immediately release all hostages and unlawfully detained persons;
- enact a law prohibiting the prosecution and punishment of persons in connection with the events that took place in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine;
- continue an inclusive national dialogue;

- adopt measures aimed at improving the humanitarian situation in Donbass;
- ensure the holding of early local elections in accordance with the Law of Ukraine on the interim status of local self-government in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Law on Special Status);
- remove unlawful military formations and military hardware, as well as militants and mercenaries, from the territory of Ukraine;
- adopt a program for the economic revival of Donbass and the resumption of vital activity in the region;
- provide personal security guarantees for the participants of the September 19th Minsk consultations.

Representatives of Ukraine (L. D. Kuchma) and the insurgents (A. W. Zakharchenko and I. W. Plotnitsky), through the mediation of the Russian representative (M. Y. Zurabov), signed a Memorandum providing, pursuant to Clause 1 of the Protocol, for the following measures in addition to those designed to consolidate bilateral ceasefire agreements: the withdrawal of heavy weapons (over 100 mm in caliber) 15 kilometers from the line of contact as of the date of signing of the Memorandum and the formation of a security zone, bans on flights by combat aircraft and UAVs, and the installation of mine blast obstacles in that security zone.

SEPTEMBER 8, 2014

The 71st anniversary of the liberation of Donbass from the Nazis is being celebrated in the Donetsk People's Republic.

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SEPTEMBER 20, 2014

The first humanitarian convoy of 183 “white swans” (KAMAZ trucks) of the Russian Federation arrives in Donetsk, carrying 2,000 metric tons of humanitarian aid to the DPR: grain, sugar, canned food, warm clothing, and medications. The army of the Donetsk People's Republic liberates the town of Zhdanivka.

SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

The leaders of the Donbass people's republics announced plans to hold elections of deputies and heads of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in the implementation of the Minsk agreements. The election is scheduled for November 2.

Citizens of the DPR begin collecting social benefits, and train traffic is resumed in the suburbs of Donetsk. Traffic was cut off in many directions as a result of the fighting, and the tracks were partially damaged.

OCTOBER 1, 2014

The beginning of the first academic year in schools and universities in the Donetsk People's Republic. On this day, School No. 57 was shelled in Donetsk. Three civilians were killed as a result.

OCTOBER 7, 2014

A meeting of the Council of Ministers of the DPR approved the principles of operation and launched the process of organizing the Central Republican Bank of the DPR.

OCTOBER 8, 2014

The Public Council for War Crimes began its work, recording and collecting evidence of war crimes against humanity committed by troops of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

OCTOBER 12, 2014

The Council of People's Deputies of the DPR finalized the date of the republic's presidential election: November 2, 2014.

OCTOBER 13, 2014

Presidential candidate and current head of the DPR Alexander Zakharchenko has collected a thousand signatures in his support, required to be registered by the Central Election Commission according to the DPR legislation.

The DPR Central Bank opens the first accounts for legal entities and individuals. "On October 11, artillery shelling hit the township of Oktyabrsky. Houses were ablaze there... What kind of truce and cease-fire are we talking about? I think the creation of a line of demarcation is actually unlikely. The Ukrainian army will not stop shelling our positions because they are not planning to stop the war. If the war stops, Poroshenko will be brought down amid the ensuing turmoil in Kyiv. That is why I do not believe a single word that comes from the Ukrainian authorities," said Vladislav Brig, head of the international information service with the political department of the DPR Defense Ministry.

OCTOBER 19, 2014

State Flag Day is celebrated on Lenin Square in Donetsk. A sewn 30-meter-long DPR flag is hoisted over a building adjacent to the square.

OCTOBER 20, 2014

Donetsk is being battered with the heaviest shelling by the Ukrainian army. A Tochka U-type missile goes off at the explosives depot of the Donetsk Chemical Products State-Owned Plant. The shockwave damaged the Main Post Office, the Donbass Arena stadium, several schools, and many other buildings in the city. Explosions were heard in Makiivka and Horlivka, adjacent to Donetsk.

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NOVEMBER 2, 2014

The general elections are held in the Donetsk People's Republic. The public movement "Donetsk Republic" garnered 64.43% of the vote.¹⁷ The public movement "Free Donbass" was runner-up with 27.75%. The incumbent President of the DPR Alexander Zakharchenko is endorsed at the office, securing 77.51% of the vote.

NOVEMBER 4, 2014

Alexander Zakharchenko was sworn in as President of the Donetsk People's Republic.

NOVEMBER 5, 2014

Two boys, Andrey Eliseev and Daniil Kuznetsov, are killed as a result of an attack by the Ukrainian army at the sports ground near School No. 63.

President Zakharchenko declares two days of state mourning.

NOVEMBER 12, 2014

The inaugural meeting of the DPR Council of Ministers takes place. Sixteen new ministers assume office.

NOVEMBER 14, 2014

The first plenary session of the People's Council opens. Deputies of the People's Council of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic took the oath of allegiance to the citizens of the DPR. The text of the oath was read by speaker Andrey Purgin, and the deputies reproduced it after him.

¹⁷ The public movement «Donetsk Republic» (led by Denis Pushilin) was created back in December 2005 in the wake of the Orange Revolution in Kyiv. It has been banned in Ukraine since 2007.

At the unrecognized election to the People's Council of the DPR in November 2014, it received 64.43% of the vote. In the November 2016 election, not recognized by the international community, it secured 72.5% of the vote.

Among other things, the deputies vowed to “stand for the people.” The session was attended by 90 out of 100 deputies.

Andrei Purgin was elected Chairman of the People’s Council of the Donetsk People’s Republic. Denis Pushilin became his deputy.

JANUARY 16, 2015

Following grueling combat, the army of the Donetsk People’s Republic takes control of Donetsk International Airport.

JANUARY 18–FEBRUARY 11, 2015

As a result of heavy artillery and mortar fire, many are dead and wounded in the center of Donetsk.

FEBRUARY 12, 2015

The February 12 “Normandy Four” talks took place as the situation in Donbass had deteriorated, largely because of the Ukrainian army, which, having stepped up its presence, began to storm militia positions. In the preceding days, there had been armed clashes between the army and the militia near Debaltseve, one of Ukraine’s largest transport hubs, which ended in the complete defeat of the Ukrainian military group. With the Ukrainian crisis escalating, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany adopted a set of measures, the so-called Minsk-2, which, among other things, involved a cease-fire in Donbass starting February 15, the withdrawal of heavy weapons, and the creation of a security zone.

Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced an opinion that the Minsk agreements will be respected and an acceptable resolution of the conflict in Ukraine will be reached. At the same time, Putin reiterated that the conflict in Ukraine cannot be solved militarily — you can only do so through negotiations with part of your country; responsible people should understand that much.

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JANUARY 22–FEBRUARY 13, 2015

In the Debaltseve Pocket, about 70 kilometers northwest of Donetsk, 6,000 Ukrainian soldiers and mercenary nationalist volunteers were surrounded and captured. The leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, stated that the DPR militia has completed the operation in Debaltseve, with the Ukrainian army suffering 3,000–3,500 fatalities in the pocket.

Zakharchenko noted that in the Debaltseve Pocket, the Ukrainian army lost its best military units and left wounded soldiers to die.

FEBRUARY 14, 2015

The People's Council of the DPR ratifies the Minsk agreement. As a result of the shelling in central Donetsk, three civilians were killed and three wounded.

MARCH 16, 2016

The first passports of the Donetsk People's Republic were issued.

AUGUST 31, 2018

A bomb explosion in central Donetsk killed Alexander Zakharchenko. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Trapeznikov became acting head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

120,000 people turned up to the funeral of Alexander Zakharchenko.

OCTOBER 23, 2018

The forum "Russian World and Donbass: From Cooperation to Integration" is held and attended by a large number of participants.

NOVEMBER 11, 2018

The general elections for the head and People's Council of the Donetsk People's Republic are held. Denis Pushilin was elected as the new president of the republic.

NOVEMBER 20, 2018

Denis Pushilin took the oath of office.

MAY 11, 2019.

The fifth anniversary of the Republic is celebrated in Donetsk featuring numerous officially invited foreign guests...

At this point, I put an ellipsis because, unfortunately, the conflict is not over yet. The death toll is rising. The political process in Ukraine, as spelled out in the Minsk agreements, has not really budged an inch over the past five years. The Ukrainian authorities, despite some liberalization of their rhetoric that began under Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency, are still unwilling to admit the obvious and consider the war in Donbass their own crime. Most of the war criminals who are accountable for the civilian casualties in Donbass are still at large — not just that, they continue to hold prominent offices in the political, military, and law enforcement bodies.

Among the most difficult issues of a political settlement are the special status of Donbass, as spelled out in the Minsk agreements, fair and transparent elections, as well as the consistency of the political process and the transfer of control over the border. Ukrainian politicians consider the "political package" of the Minsk agreements a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Do they have the political will and whatever it takes to take such an "unpopular" step? This is all too iffy.

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NO FOTO!!!

Chapter 9.2.

DPR: A VIEW BY THE FOREIGN OBSERVER

The DPR has its own interests, whose implementation is limited to the Minsk process, in which it has to participate. Today, the republic has no official foreign policy concept but is actively forming a foreign policy ideology that includes the priority of the Russian vector of integration, the unacceptability of the Donbass reintegration with Ukraine, and the willingness to use the full range of measures to protect its population and uphold its statehood.

Since the declaration of independence in April 2014, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) claims to have pursued its own foreign policy, different from that of Ukraine, and has been trying to follow this course amid the unending armed conflict and the constant threat of full-scale enemy invasion. Despite the instability in the world politics and the republic's lack of status as a subject of international law, the DPR government agencies carry out foreign policy activities, establishing contacts with other unrecognized and partially recognized states, communicating with international organizations, and conducting public diplomacy activities.

In its foreign policy, the DPR systematically appeals to the norms of International Law and morality, repeatedly insists on the need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with Ukraine, and is working to invite foreign observers and civil society representatives to the republic.

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Over the past five years, more than 250 foreign delegations have visited the Donetsk People's Republic. Guests come from Russia, the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Italy, Norway, Germany, and many other countries.

Again, the current conflict in eastern Ukraine receives scanty coverage in our Western media. The reports often refer only to pro-Russian separatists who, at the behest or at least with the help of Russia, seek to secede the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) observation mission, which has been operating in Donbass since 2014, has yet to provide evidence in its weekly reports that Russian servicemen are actually fighting for the republics. Nevertheless, the main focus of our media is only on "Russian aggression" and Putin's alleged imperial aspirations to restore the Soviet Union.

During my trips to the Donetsk People's Republic, I was able to get a picture of the situation in this country. We could communicate not only with civilians but also with politicians — the leaders of the unrecognized republic. At the time, hostilities were mostly confined to sections of the front line and the so-called line of contact. Artillery shelling of large cities within a few kilometers of the front line was already less frequent than in the first three years of the war, though we heard artillery shells and mines blasting every day. Meanwhile, the life of residents of large cities is a far cry from that of the people on the line of contact. At first, visitors find it hard to get to grips with this blend of everyday routines and warfare in close proximity.

In central Donetsk, people sit in cafes, and parents play with their children on outdoor playgrounds. The stores are fully stocked, and life basically goes on the way it does in any other big city in Europe. Streets and parks are well-maintained and clean, and especially in

summer, Donetsk looks like a spacious, green city. A woman we talked with in downtown Donetsk told us that her son was a militiaman and she was extremely happy when he came home for the weekend straight from the front lines. On their way home, they walked past a cafe where people were sitting and celebrating something.

Death and blossoming life go hand in hand here, but war changes the perception of life. The closer you get to the front lines, the more you notice those shifts in the scenery. Roads damaged by shelling and bombing cannot be repaved at once. Many trees are uprooted or have withered away. Bullet marks can be seen on walls, fences, and lampposts. Despite this, residents of detached houses are trying to look after their gardens, even planting flowers.

The frontline towns of Horlivka and Zaitsevo and the village of Gagarin Mine, which I visited several times in 2018, are shelled almost every night with grenade launchers by the Ukrainian army. Since early morning, Ukrainian snipers are waiting for their targets who are residents commuting to work and even children on their way to school. One of the most dangerous jobs in the People's Republic is an electrician. They go out in the morning to repair power lines damaged by nighttime bombing raids and are often gunned down by snipers. More than a hundred people have already lost their lives in this way. Some militia soldiers told us that they were forced to follow orders to ignore bombardment from the Ukrainian side. The militia can and should only fight back a direct attack.

The OSCE observation mission in Ukraine has a total of about 1,300 staff. However, people in Donbass have a lot of distrust toward them. Many assume that the OSCE sides with the Ukrainian authorities, and they may not be far from the truth. The OSCE reports on "areas outside of government control" and avoids naming the people's republics by their official names. The mayor of Zaitsevo in the north of the Donetsk People's Republic complained to me

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that the OSCE has not been in their area for more than a year, although these places are shelled daily. Documents and reports are regularly sent to their Donetsk office about the destruction, fatalities, and the wounded, but these records elicit no reaction from the mission officers.

Observers avoid keeping statistics on which side the attacks or bombings are coming from. You can only report on what was observed directly at the time of the shelling. This is stated in responses to inquiries from journalists. It is probably for a reason that many residents call the OSCE staff "blind."

In the village of Gagarin Mine, where we were examining a private house that had been obliterated in an overnight raid, we were approached by neighbors of the victims, who wanted to know who we were and what we wanted. Three elderly women told us that they sleep in the basement every night because they are afraid of mortar attacks. One of them tearfully added that their house had no basement, so she could only pray that a mine or a shell would bypass them. Her husband, she admits, is lucky to work the night shift, so he is safe at night anyway.

The father and the son, 12-year-old Vlad, whom we visited several times, lost their wife and mother, who was fatally injured during the bombing, and their home. The boy went blind. His father had to quit his job as a shaft sinker in order to take care of his son. Vlad needs several surgeries and a prosthetic eye. The Russian state covers the surgeries, but not the travel expenses it takes to get to Moscow. I have heard many such sad stories.

Families are languishing in shell-damaged houses in dire need of repair or in basements and trying, in spite of the war, to live as decent a life as possible. Regardless of the bombings, the schools are open. The uncertainty about whether your house will still be standing when you get home from school or work makes people sick over time. Assistance to residents of frontline areas is provided only by structures of the People's Republic as private initiatives.

Since September 2014, Russia has been sending humanitarian aid to Donbass, which is badly needed by the population. However, even this is covered by our media with distrust, as if it were military aid.

At child care centers and orphanages where Ukrainian children also live, the staff told me that every kid dreams of being adopted. The Donetsk People's Republic spends a lot of money providing psychological support to these children, but with a large number of kids and adults in need of help, the funds are tight. Many in the West think that people could simply turn away from the "separatists" and return to Ukraine, where they could get help. This is the opinion of those who do not have the flimsiest idea of what is happening in Donbass, that there is a war going on there and that its disturbing echoes reverberate every day.

Our Western media often make the mistake of talking about the population and "pro-Russian separatists" as if they were two different groups. It was not Russia or the people of eastern Ukraine who attacked Kyiv — it was Kyiv that sent the Ukrainian army and radical nationalist units to Donbass, which triggered the response and defense of the residents of Donbass. The behavior of the Ukrainian army in Donbass is well known. In general, we can call the Ukrainian army an instrument of violence against part of the population living in eastern Ukraine. They tarnished their banners with mass crimes against humanity, the extermination of civilians, looting, and robbery. Moreover, Kyiv sent their subversive raiders, which included foreign mercenaries. Unfortunately, international human rights organizations underreact to Kyiv's violations of civil and human rights in the LPR and DPR.

While we are pointing the fingers at Russia, the West and the US officially support Ukraine, as well as the Ukrainian army. Despite the fact that Ukraine is neither a member of NATO nor of the European Union, military advisers are sent to Ukraine and weapons and equipment are

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shipped there. During my visit to Luhansk, I was shown equipment and ammunition that are only in service with the armies of NATO countries. German flags were seen on duffel bags and MREs, among other things. Since January 2015, the Ukrainian parliament has been referring to the People's Militia as a terrorist organization, thus — successfully — attempting to linguistically separate the People's Militia and the people of Donbass and thereby obtain the West's approval for military involvement. Kiev has at times succeeded in doing this. However, the West did not take into account the fact that the people in Donbass sided with their people's militia and, later, with the regular army. They are used to being demeaned, called terrorists, separatists, and that is why many of them say ironically: "Yes, I'm a separatist."

We hear nothing about the fates of numerous people; our media are silent about them. I emphasize that the problems of protecting victims of the military conflict are based on the fact that their rights are not respected by the government of Ukraine, which ignores international humanitarian law while waging war on its own people. This applies to a broad category of rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of people living in the war-torn territory.

Let me remind you that the residents of Donbass demanded the establishment of two official languages, but the government did not support these demands and opposed its own population. The Ukrainian government is purposefully trying to label its citizens living in Donbass as terrorists craving to seize power. This was the cause of the military conflict, which has not ended.

The government of Ukraine is unable to fulfill the basic responsibility of the state: to protect human life. The right to life, the basic constitutional right of Ukrainian citizens, is violated by constant shelling of residential areas by both the Armed Forces of Ukraine and by legally dubious armed groups: militant nationalist organizations. According to the UN, five years of

military conflict in Donbass have resulted in 13,000–13,200 deaths. Of these, 3,345 are civilians, including 298 passengers killed in the Malaysia Airlines plane crash. The actual number of fatalities may be much higher. How many servicemen of the Ukrainian army have died is top-secret information. Another 1.5 million people were forced to relocate. According to official DPR data, 4,884 people have been killed in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) since the outbreak of the armed conflict in 2014. Among the victims are 81 children...

It is also worth noting that the government of Ukraine ignores its direct responsibilities regarding any social benefits, thereby violating the social rights of citizens. This undermines the constitutional principle of Ukraine, which defines it as a social democratic state. Moreover, there was also a violation of the rights of citizens who suffered from the armed conflict, such as restricted freedom of movement. The official transport service with Donbass was terminated in 2015.

Thus, based on the above, we can conclude that the current government of Ukraine flagrantly disregards the international treaties and obligations that it undertook in the process of signing and ratifying documents concerning constitutional and international human rights.



With Alexander Zakharchenko at a Donetsk restaurant, 2018. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

Chapter 9.3.

THE DPR LEADER ALEXANDER ZAKHARCHENKO. BATYA

In Russian, “Batya” is a diminutive form of the word “father,” something like “dad.” Although the DPR leader Alexander Zakharchenko was not much older than his subordinates, his constant care of the fighters earned Zakharchenko the Republic-wide nickname “Batya.” He was not your typical leader; his lack of executive experience was more of an asset, and for many of his countrymen, Alexander Zakharchenko was one of their own, the people’s man.

The first president of the Donetsk People’s Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko (1976–2018), was a charismatic personality, projecting an image of an active Russian man who controls and manages everything. Almost always wearing a military uniform, for Western media, he was a poster boy for an unscrupulous dictator who coerced the people of Donbass into disavowing Kyiv. In 2018, I met with Alexander Zakharchenko several times.

I was surprised by these meetings, as he turned out to be a politician as much as a military man. He had a very accurate idea of what the Donetsk People’s Republic should look like

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over time. At our first official meeting in his office, he shared with me his vision of a state in which large companies should be under state control and profits used for the benefit of all citizens. Zakharchenko had good knowledge of the Norwegian and German governments and the political landscape of these countries, and in our conversation, he admitted that he did not want to live in Norway or Germany.

After the official part of the visit, he asked if we had time and offered to show us around. He attached a handgun and a dagger to his belt, and we stepped out onto the backyard to his car, an armored Lexus SUV. Zakharchenko got behind the wheel, and with his flashing light on, we drove through the streets of Donetsk following two vehicles with armed bodyguards. Zakharchenko put a Kalashnikov assault rifle between the driver's seat and the center console. On our ride, Alexander showed us the local sights and told us interesting stories about them. When we pulled up at a traffic light next to another car, he waved hello to the driver, who recognized him.

To the west of the city, we stopped near the completely obliterated Donetsk airport. Zakharchenko rolled up the car window and explained to us that the Ukrainian front line was only 400–700 meters away. We could have gotten out to take pictures, but he preferred that we stay in the car and not take any chances: the snipers could have opened fire.

Ahead of my trip to Donetsk, I was already aware of public criticism of Zakharchenko's government from a number of human rights organizations, which accused him of torturing people and even the illegal executions. At the luncheon that followed, I invited him to



School No. 19 in Donetsk, 2018. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

comment on or refute these claims. He startled me with his honesty: “Yes, there have been human rights violations from both the Ukrainian and our sides. There have been some pretty miserable circumstances. Since 2016, though, when the regular army was formed, this is no longer the case. We no longer hire mercenaries, and all combatants report to commanders

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On Donetsk television, 2018. Photo from the archive of Hendrik Weber.

and show proper discipline.” I pressed on with my questions and asked if Donetsk treated prisoners of war well.

“Give me his last name, and I can tell you where he is and how he is faring. Everyone receives the necessary medical care, and they can also meet with their mothers. Every month, we send

the Ukrainian army lists of our missing guys. We want to know if they are in capture or perhaps dead... But we have yet to get an answer to our requests.”

Following the tragic death of Alexander Zakharchenko on August 31, 2018, killed in a terrorist attack at the Separ (short for “separatist”) cafe, where people had gathered to pay tribute to the famous singer Iosif Kobzon, who had died the day before and who was also a native of Donetsk, the Republic briefly slipped into a depression. Alexander Zakharchenko, who stood for hope and who could have countered the Ukrainian government and its warmongering, was killed. More than 100,000 people took to the streets to pay their last respects to the Donbass leader and his bodyguard, Vyacheslav Dotsenko, who also died in the attack. When I was in Donetsk six months later and came to his grave, it was covered with about a meter-high layer of fresh flowers. Despite the fact that Zakharchenko was an official participant in the Minsk negotiations, no official condolences were offered to Donetsk from Germany and most other states.

His successor, Denis Pushilin, is a completely different person. Prior to his election as the new head of the DPR in November 2018, he gained some political experience, having headed the parliament of the self-proclaimed republic for some time. It seems to me that in his practical steps, he relies more on diplomacy and cooperation than his predecessor. However, this also requires the will of the Ukrainian government in Kyiv, in other words, of Western states. However, in a short time, Pushilin has established good political and economic relations with Russia, Crimea, and a number of other state formations in the post-Soviet space. I hope he will be able to reinvigorate the Minsk process.

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At present, the conflict in eastern Ukraine remains unresolved. The Ukrainian government does not seek a peaceful resolution, as evidenced by the news bulletins. But it is worth noting that the intensity of the conflict has subsided. It is difficult to predict what will happen to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in the medium term. It is certainly conceivable that without war and restrictive sanctions, the republics could be economically sustainable. Joining Russia, due to a number of geopolitical considerations, is unlikely at this point. The reintegration of the unrecognized republics into Ukraine seems to be a big no-no for both sides, too. In this case, Ukraine would have to take action against the nationalist forces and grant the republics exceptionally broad autonomy to be able to offer them a real prospect of joint development. The confidence of the Donbass residents in Ukrainian politics has gone. "When they started shelling us from combat jets and helicopters, we ripped Ukrainian flags off the flagpoles," a resident of Donetsk told me.

As with Crimea, it is important for Donetsk to make civil society in the West aware of the real state of affairs, which could encourage both European governments and, above all, Washington to make concessions to the unilateral sanctions policy. It is equally important that human rights NGOs in the West and the Western media act more independently. They should not be afraid to travel to Luhansk and Donetsk, and they should definitely double-check the dubious information from Kyiv.

Instead of treating Russia as the alleged aggressor, we in the West should assume the role of an honest broker. Moreover, it is absolutely necessary to agree on measures with

Russia as well, and representatives of both republics should be in on the negotiation process.



Representatives of the national clubs of Friends of the Crimea in front of the famous Livadia Palace, where in February 1945, the vital decisions on the postwar arrangement of the world and the creation of the UN were taken. Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.

Chapter 10.

PEOPLE'S DIPLOMACY AND FRIENDS OF CRIMEA

In this book, I have often used the term “people’s diplomacy.” But what does it mean?

People’s diplomacy is primarily about the informal contacts of ordinary people or NGOs that foster strong relationships, mutually beneficial cooperation, and a better understanding of the culture, traditions, and everyday habits of citizens of different countries.

I first heard the term “people’s diplomacy” in Crimea in May 2016. The peninsula was then going through hard times, caused by a cutoff from transport, water, and energy communications initiated by Ukraine, which was collectively supported by Western countries. Sanctions affected literally every aspect of life in the region. The truth about the situation in Crimea was censored in the media. The facts about the vote of the Crimean people at the 2014 referendum are still suppressed or misrepresented. Because of the restrictions, Western officials and politicians do not come to Crimea. It was impossible to build direct international relations at the level of government agencies and business representatives.

The relevance and urgency of this problem were obvious to me. This is why many concerned individuals and myself decided that the world should receive as much objective information

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as possible about the choice made by the residents of Crimea, about their suffering and problems, so that the agenda of lifting the illegal and inhumane sanctions would become an important international issue.

It was not easy. While businessmen are still somehow able to circumvent sanctions through their structural subdivisions, representative offices, branches, and companies abroad, for politicians and civil society representatives, it is far more difficult since they almost immediately fall under the sanctions pressure of Brussels or Washington. Under the circumstances, the Russian government supported the idea of inviting ordinary citizens to Crimea, commenting: "If the 'establishment' does not come to us, then we will invite businesspeople, representatives of civil society, public unions, and organizations to show the republic from the inside and thus help them get the idea of the way things are in Crimea."

Yuri Gempel, one of the active lobbyists for the idea of people's diplomacy in Crimea, offers the following description: "We did not just witness but participated in the most important geopolitical event of the 21st century — the reunification of Crimea with Russia. The spring events of 2014 sparked a patriotic upsurge inside the country and became a starting point for strengthening Russia's position in the international arena. Western countries did not recognize the results of the Crimean referendum and imposed sanctions against Russia and Crimea. With the information blockade in the foreign media, a distorted picture of the current situation in Crimea is making its rounds, so it is becoming increasingly important for us to be able to tell the truth. We are making efforts to dispel the distrust and myths that have been propagated in Western countries about Crimea. It is through informal contacts of ordinary individuals and public organizations that we will



Plenary session of the Yalta International Economic Forum (YIEF). Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.

be able to hammer home our truth about Crimea.” He sincerely believes that the voice of people’s diplomacy activists, uniting ordinary people of different countries around immutable ideas of universal human relations, people who stand for constructive relations with Russia, will be heard and understood, and it will contribute to the development of horizontal international relations of Crimea and help overpower the information blockade and sanctions.

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*Sergey Aksyonov with the participants of the Yalta International Economic Forum.
Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.*

Despite numerous bans, the Republic of Crimea is regularly visited by delegations of politicians, businesspeople, and public figures from a wide range of countries. These include people of different occupations, ages, and religious denominations from all over the world: Japan, Italy, France, Norway, Germany, USA, Austria, Sweden, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Israel, Serbia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Turkey, India, People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Armenia, Ukraine, South Ossetia, and others. And today, Yuri Hempel, together with

his colleagues, is working on a project of people's diplomacy, inviting more foreign delegations to Crimea, which helps to expand the scope and geography of bilateral cooperation. All this testifies to the success of the public initiative of the Crimeans, which is especially important because the Republic of Crimea continues to be a protagonist in the undeclared new "cold war" against Russia.

Another unrecognized republic, the DPR, which emerged as a result of the armed civil conflict in southeastern Ukraine, has also begun to realize the value of people's diplomacy and to invite various delegations from European countries to communicate. Natalia Nikonorova, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPR, puts it the following way: "It is necessary to emphasize the increasing role of people's diplomacy as an important tool for the formation of a positive image of the Donetsk People's Republic at the international level. The DPR's representative offices abroad make a significant contribution to this process."

Our NGO "People's Diplomacy — Norway" solves this problem and acts together with representatives of the Crimean civil society to improve relations between Russia and Norway, against the existing information and economic blockade. We also support the efforts of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics to figure out a peaceful solution to the protracted conflict with Ukraine. Only a people's diplomacy that is guided by the principles of humanism and justice will be able to activate the peace process.

In the Western sense, "a diplomat," according to Duden, Germany's most famous and most accurate dictionary,¹⁸ is "the highest official in the foreign, diplomatic service, accredited in a foreign country and representing the interests of their country there." In Russia,

¹⁸ First published by Conrad Duden on July 7, 1880, it formed the basis of uniform German spelling.

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At a meeting of the Coordinating Council of the Friends of Crimea International Association in Yalta. Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.

broader definitions of diplomacy are used, and public, or people's, diplomacy is seen as one of the most important technologies for the development of international relations and cooperation.

At a meeting of the Coordinating Council of the Friends of Crimea International Association in Yalta. Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.

At the same time, public diplomacy today is undergoing a new stage of global development, known as “new people’s diplomacy” or “global civil society diplomacy.” It is up to civil society to preserve the values and true meanings of diplomacy, which, by its very nature, is meant to resolve conflicts through peaceful means, to reinvent diplomacy as a model of relations between peoples, which, for centuries, have been understood as inter-state relations. Civil society is more sensitive to understanding the meaning of world processes, whose participants, unable to comprehend the deeper content of what is going on, can cause undesirable developments, such as “color revolutions.” Mutual understanding and dialogue have become a necessity for common human survival, especially amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Modern public diplomacy offers various options for building international relations, which are more effective, closer to the needs of ordinary people, and better represent their interests than official diplomacy. In addition, online tools have triggered the development of new forms of diplomacy. New types of international relations make it possible to build relationships transcending the borders. The new paradigm of diplomacy involves many interactions between people from different countries in the digital space, whose main asset is truthful information and open access to it. Dialogue platforms, such as the annual forum of the Black Sea Association for International Cooperation or the Yalta International Economic Forum, are an instrument of public diplomacy, where civil society becomes the initiator and driving force of good-neighborly, mutually beneficial international relations between countries and peoples.

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Our goal remains to overturn the image of Russia as an enemy in Europe and to promote dialogue. How successful are we in what we do? This question has no definite answer. That being said, I believe that we have already made headway. At least, before our trips to Crimea and Donbass, the local media reported almost nothing about these regions. However, after these trips, the official idea of the annexation of these regions by Russia went viral. Many Norwegian experts on Russia and lawyers emailed us and told us that their submissions on this subject were simply declined. The situation has changed, in part because of the public debates that we pushed our opponents to have. At the same time, more and more realist politicians raise their voices in Europe and Norway to openly say that it is necessary to come to terms with reality and at least begin a dialogue with Russia.

A relatively new initiative of representatives of the people's diplomacy is the creation of the Friends of Crimea International Association, which is headed by former Prime Minister of Slovakia, well-known politician and public figure Ján Čarnogurský. The non-partisan public organization is an official association of various clubs that advocate the development of friendly relations with Crimea.

The goals the Friends of Crimea proclaim are:

- to restore mutual trust in the world, friendship, and good neighborliness between countries and peoples;
- to develop by the means of public diplomacy cooperation between countries in political, economic, trade, scientific, cultural, educational, energetic, transport, ecological and other spheres;



Friends of Crimea, headed by the chairman of the Coordinating Council of the organization, prominent Slovak politician, and public figure Ján Čarnogurský. Photo from the archive of the Business and Cultural Center of the Republic of Crimea in Moscow.

- to stop an imposed upon the world information war that leads to fueling conflicts, growing threats, and international crisis;
- to acknowledge the legitimacy of the all-Crimean referendum of 2014 and the rights of the Crimean people to determine its future;

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– to provide international community with objective information about life in Crimea.

Representatives of more than twenty countries are members of the Friends of Crimea International Association. Norway, through our NGO “People’s Diplomacy — Norway,” is a founding member and board member of this organization.

Many media outlets try to express disbelief and present this participation as ridiculous or even dangerous. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the influential Atlantic Council think tank, are also involved in this propaganda along with alleged experts.

In their reports “Trojan Horses of the Kremlin” (*Report “Trojan Horses of the Kremlin 3,” dedicated to “peddlers of Russian influence” in four European countries: Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden — Russian translator’s note*), they selected individuals and organizations allegedly spreading Russian propaganda or at least “favorably disposed toward Russia.” These so-called “experts” are mostly journalists, known for their adherence to the Western version of political events and a certain twist they put on everything related to Russia. For example, one section of this report also mentions our association “People’s Diplomacy — Norway.” It allegedly “undertook several highly profitable trips to occupied Crimea and was present as a self-proclaimed observer in the March 2018 presidential election in Russia,” according to the authors. The catchy title of this report alone suggests it is about to reveal a groundbreaking discovery. However, in the end, the “experts” come to the trite conclusion that everything is “fine” in Northern Europe and no one has confidence in the propaganda-imbued speeches.

But let us return from fiction and political context to reality. I firmly believe that Europe and Russia have much more in common than they have differences. We do not want to let the media and politicians fabricate an image of Russia and the Russians as the enemy. We do not want a falling-out between Europe and Russia.

That is why we will continue to work together with other organizations from all over Europe. Our activities are aimed at overcoming the information blockade and sanctions against Crimea and the Crimeans and contributing to open dialogue between Europe and Russia.



Construction of a key transportation artery — the Crimean Bridge. Photo from the archive of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation.

SUMMARY

In this book, I have tried to convey the Russian point of view, which appears very rarely or in a very distorted way in our media, as well as my own stance on the issue. Using the media, our government paints a hostile picture that, for lack of evidence, does not hold water. It is therefore important to know and understand the events that led to this new open confrontation after the end of the Cold War. My goal was for this book to make a small contribution to the coverage of some of Russia's political views. And, accordingly, I wanted to give Russia the floor.

Of course, I do not claim to offer exhaustive descriptions. There are quite a few noteworthy books and articles on the subject of Crimea and Donbass that I can recommend to interested readers.

We must understand that the situation between the West (the United States and Europe), on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, is much more complicated than our media want us to believe.

It is not just about Ukraine's "democratic" accession to the EU and Russia's so-called "annexation of Crimea." It is these issues that have come to be perceived as the backbone of the crisis, pushing its the genuine essence — real geopolitics — aside.

Ukraine today is the poorest country in Europe: in terms of living standards, it falls far behind other former Soviet republics. Ukraine's foreign debt as well as its dependence on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will not bring improvements to the people of this once

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rich Soviet republic in the short- and medium-term, but on the contrary, will be a considerable burden to them.

It is clear to me that the EU and its affiliated institutions will continue to exert their influence over Ukraine in the coming years to align the government with their perceptions. Just over 30 million inhabitants in a giant area are an amazing sales market for European and American big companies. Even if the purchasing power of residents is far lower than the European average, companies can use an army of cheap labor. Agrarians have been arguing about the ownership of the famous “black soil” for years, as confirmed by the Oakland Institute in its publication “The Corporate Takeover of Ukrainian Agriculture.” Because of its internal chaos and the corruption of the ruling elite, Ukraine will become some sort of a testbed for Western and transnational corporations.

At the same time, there is still an official US desire to separate European know-how from fundamental Russian values. Moreover, this strategy is followed overtly. George Friedman, the manager of Stratfor, the influential private geopolitical intelligence platform, said in a speech in Chicago on February 3, 2015: “The timeless primal interest of the United States that has caused us to fight wars for centuries — World War I, World War II, and the Cold War — is the relations between Germany and Russia. Because, united, they are the only force that can threaten us, and we were interested in making sure that didn’t happen.” Our media lacks the foresight to understand that Europe and Ukraine are seen as pawns in a big geopolitical game.

We must keep in mind that geopolitical interests are more subtle than they seem. If we ignore that, the pieces of the puzzle do not fall in their places. Perhaps this is the ultimate goal: promoting and protecting democracy and human rights in other countries, we must first cut the enormous military and NATO spending and engage us more in dialogue with other countries to provide real humanitarian aid.

Toward the end of the Cold War, Europe had a unique opportunity to establish real cooperation and start working together with Russia. Unfortunately, we blew that chance and, instead, felt like absolute winners in the Cold War. Without even taking into account the interests of this large country. Russia, on the other hand, has realigned in a different direction and claims a new place in the world, if only as a major regional player so far. I highly doubt that Russian President Vladimir Putin craves power and world domination. When it comes to Russia, we have to be prepared to set different standards, not the ones we apply to other countries.

In Europe, we also need to have an honest, equal dialogue with Russia. Most of Russia belongs to the European continent. Russian culture, Russian history, and Russian people are much closer to us than we realize. It is in our common interest that we stop creating an image of the enemy. It is time for dialogue and cooperation. This is especially important now, when humanity is entering an era of global systemic crisis, when the balance of power on the world stage is radically changing, when new viruses and natural disasters threaten humanity. This does not mean that we should blindly accept anything and echo the Russian position. Not at all. And yet, we must be careful to avoid getting mired in an entirely different narrative that explicitly contradicts our real European interests.

It is important to remain vigilant because those who only extol democracy and liberal human rights too often pursue covert economic and financial interests, whether it be markets, natural resources, or oil pipelines. In this way, they are trying to compromise and undermine the establishment of functional, good-neighborly relations with Russia, to unleash a new Cold War, which, at any point, can turn “hot.” That is why it is high time for people’s diplomacy as a vehicle for peacemaking ideas. We have to rediscover ways of trusting each other. This is what makes a human being: a need for real images and sensations. And then, I am sure, distrust and enmity will be kicked for good in our society.

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Edited by *G. L. Muradov* and *S. A. Galani*

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Translated into Russian by *S. V. Kolodyzhnaya-Sheremetyeva*

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Design: *A. V. Makarova*

Layout: *A. V. Pinchuk*

«N.Orianda»™

ИП Дымникова Н.В. 91 № 000002810 от 25.11.2014 г.

Approved for printing 05.05.2021.

Format 70x100 ¹/₁₆. Typeface «Officina Sans Book». Offset printing.
Conventionally printed sheets 10,1. XXX copies. Order № 86.

«N.Orianda»™ 295051, Russia, Republic of Crimea,
Simferopol, s/b 13

Тел.: 8 (800) 505-15-19, 8 (3652) 60-49-19

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Printed from the customer's ready-made files at the:
LLC «Constant»

Russia, Belgorod region,

Belgorod district, Severny settlement, Berezovaya str., h. 1/12.

Tel./fax: (4722) 300-720; www.konstanta-print.ru