

How Crimeans See Ukraine Crisis

Two years ago, the Maidan uprising ousted Ukraine's elected president, prompting resistance in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, with Crimeans voting overwhelmingly to reunify with Russia, a move that then sparked a new cold war. As propaganda enveloped this issue, Natylie Baldwin went to see for herself last fall.

By Natylie Baldwin

We had boarded the bus that would transport us from the gates of Moscow's Vnukovo airport to the plane waiting on the tarmac to fly us to Simferopol, Crimea, when a friendly blonde in her late 30's asked us in accented English if we were from "The States"?

When we answered that we were, she told us she currently lived in Texas but was going to visit relatives in Crimea. As we chatted more and my travel mate and I explained our reason for going there – to see Crimea for ourselves and find out from the people living there what they thought about the Ukraine war and the peninsula's reunification with Russia – it became apparent that this lady had a few things she wanted to get off her chest.

"You cannot separate Ukraine from Russia, there is too much culture and history together," she said. Choking up on her words, she continued, "American people are good people I have many friends in the U.S. – but their government leaders are not because they interfere too much in other places. I worry about Hillary [Clinton], you know. When [Libyan leader Muammar] Gaddafi was killed, she said 'We came, we saw, he died. Ha ha.' What kind of leader is that? Is she going to be the next president?"

She felt that, due to the violence on the Maidan and Washington's interference in the form of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland's manipulations, Putin's intervention in Crimea was correct: "Putin did the right thing for Crimea, he is a good leader."

When we landed in Simferopol, it was clear that the small airport had been recently renovated as everything was clean and freshly painted. After haggling down the price to something reasonable with the proprietor of a taxi service, we loaded ourselves into a cab in which stale cigarette smoke hung thick in the air.

My travel mate, who spoke functional Russian, asked the driver what he thought about Crimea's reunification with Russia. He replied in broken English, "Historically and ethnically we are Russian, so it is better to be with Russia

than Ukraine.” He acknowledged, however, that there were still many problems to be addressed and it would take time, but with Russia they now had hope.

His sentiments would be echoed throughout our stay in Crimea. Tatyana, a professional tour guide from Yalta, told us the next day that, in terms of road repair and airport renovation, there had been more infrastructure investment in one year under Russian governance than there had been in all the 23 years with post-Soviet Ukraine.

Looking around Simferopol, more such investment would obviously be needed. The roads and buildings had not been sufficiently maintained and it gave the place an air of being run down. Alongside that, however, were parks and trees, roads filled with people in cars and packed mini-buses during commute hours, and parents walking on sidewalks clutching the hands of their small children. Everyone was dressed in the typical Western attire one would see in the U.S. and most young people fingered smart phones.

On the bus ride from Simferopol to Yalta, there were many small houses in various stages of disrepair and frozen construction. My travel mate, who had been going in and out of Russia since the 1980s, remarked that it looked like the Soviet era.

As we approached the Yalta coastline, however, the lush trees and sparkling blue water that reflected a sunlit sky, emerged from the mountainous journey, dissipating the gloom. We toured Livadia Palace, the seasonal home of the czars from Alexander II to Nicholas II. It was also the location of the famous Yalta Conference of 1945 where Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin met as WWII was winding down.

Afterwards, we walked down a lane littered with lovely and well-cared for “stray” cats that now took up residence on the grounds of the palace. Then we came to a small two-story restaurant where we had lunch with Tatyana, who articulated the feelings of many Crimeans about the Maidan protests that rocked Kiev in early 2014:

“No one asked us if we wanted to go along with Maidan. There are Russians as well as people who are a mix of Russian and Ukrainian here. We are not against Ukraine as many of us have relatives there, but Maidan was not simply a spontaneous protest. We are aware of the phone call with Victoria Nuland and [U.S. Ambassador] Geoffrey Pyatt, we saw the photos of her with [opposition leaders] Yatsenyuk, Tiagnibok [leader of Svoboda, the neo-fascist group that was condemned by the EU in 2012], and Klitschko on television. We saw the images of her handing out cookies to the protesters.”

We returned to Simferopol that evening and talked to a group of local small business entrepreneurs. They spoke of the many disruptions that the political upheaval with Ukraine and the subsequent reunification had caused. Kiev stopped paying salaries and pensions and even cut off electricity, which prompted Russia to provide generators to hospitals and other establishments where there were significant numbers of people in need.

In fact, Crimea had been dependent upon Ukraine for 70 percent of its power since reunification. Consequently, Russia is in the process of laying a power cable beneath the Kerch Strait from the Krasnodar region, which is now partially operational and will be fully operational by summer of 2016.

In the meantime, Russia had been paying Ukraine \$211 million to supply Crimea with energy through the end of 2015. In what is perceived by many to be retaliation for seceding, Ukraine had seriously cut energy supplies to Crimea without notice numerous times throughout 2014 and raised prices by 15 percent. Similar issues with water supply have also been reported.

“Kiev claims they want us back, but then they alienate us even more with these kinds of actions,” said one of the entrepreneurs, shaking his head.

Crimeans are also dealing with high inflation due to a combination of sanctions and transportation difficulties. Until the permanent land bridge to Russia is completed in December 2018, transportation between the mainland and the peninsula are limited to temporary bridges, ferry service and flights to and from Crimea’s one airport in Simferopol. (A second airport is due to be built in Sevastopol by spring 2016).

More and stricter business regulations under Russia’s governance have also proved to be a challenge. The entrepreneurs acknowledged that some people had lost businesses due to either the political transfer or the sanctions. But this did not change their conviction that the reunification with Russia was worth the short-term cost in order to save themselves from the extremist elements who had taken power in Kiev, immediately introduced legislation threatening the status of the Russian language, and fueled episodes of violence that ensued against ethnic Russians in Crimea.

The subsequent “anti-terrorist operation” employed by Kiev to deal with similar concerns of ethnic Russians in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, instead of negotiation, has only cemented this view.

“We are suffering under the sanctions, but the sanctions will not make us go back to where we don’t want to be,” said one entrepreneur. “There are still many Crimeans willing to fight if it were to become necessary.”

The next day we took another bus ride, this time to Sevastopol, where Russia has had its naval base since the reign of Catherine the Great in the Eighteenth Century. In fact, Crimea had been part of Russia from Catherine's time until Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev decided to give it as a gift to Ukraine in 1954. Since both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union at the time, the possible consequences of this decision were not considered.

Viktor Vasilievich Savitskiy, a retired Russian naval officer and resident of Crimea who served as an election monitor during the referendum, recalls being asked by British naval officers after the dissolution of the USSR, how having their naval base in a different country would work out. Savitskiy said, "I thought it was a strange question at the time. We had a long history and cultural ties with Ukraine. Now I realize those questions were not so strange."

Not only is Sevastopol Russia's only warm water port, it is the place where the Soviets stopped the German advance for eight months during WWII. By the time the siege had ended, around 90 percent of the city had been devastated.

One of the first places we visited in Sevastopol was a hostel run by Yuriy Mishin and his wife Manita. Born in Chita in the Lake Baikal area of Russia near the border of Siberia, Mishin was nostalgic for the days of the Soviet Union in which he'd grown up and said he would like to see a voluntary commonwealth consisting of the former republics of the USSR.

In February 2014, Mishin was a participant in Crimea's resistance to the post-coup regime in Kiev, a resistance movement variously referred to as the "Crimean Spring" and the "Third Defense of Sevastopol." He believes the events of the Maidan culminated in an illegal change of government in Kiev.

Although he says that under Viktor Yushchenko's rule from 2005 to 2010, Ukrainian ultra-nationalism enjoyed a resurgence, there had been no substantive threat to Russian speakers in Crimea until the Maidan protests were hijacked by extremists who chanted threatening slogans ["Ukraine for Ukrainians"] and turned to violence. He said that after Maidan, "friends I'd had in Ukraine called and threatened to kill me because I was the director of a Russian historical club."

Mishin said the people of Sevastopol began to have meetings to discuss ways to defend themselves from the growing upheaval that the events in Kiev had set in motion. He made a point that we would hear repeatedly from Crimeans we spoke to – that they did not expect Putin to intervene or to accept their requests for reunification due to the numerous times since the 1990s when Crimeans voted, either directly or through their parliament, for reunification, which Russia had always ignored. But they are very grateful that he did.

“Putin’s move was a pleasant surprise,” Mishin said. “He is a strong and brave politician.”

When asked what he thought should be the top priorities for Crimea going forward, he said “peace – no bombs or missiles – and develop infrastructure and tourism.”

As we hurried from one appointment to another in Sevastopol, we walked along a narrow cobbled road studded with ruts. Manita lamented how many times over the years there had been money allocated by the Ukrainian government to fix the roads but the repairs never happened because of the abiding corruption.

After about a five-minute walk in the morning chill, we arrived at a small office where a banner with the St. George colors draped one wall. A tall barrel-chested man with short dark hair and a full beard greeted us with a hardy handshake. His name was Anatoly Anatolievich Mareta and he was the leader (ataman) of the Black Sea Hundred Cossacks. He offered us hot tea as we sat down at a large table.

He then spoke at length about the events leading up to the Crimean resistance in early 2014. After the Feb. 21, 2014 agreement between embattled President Viktor Yanukovich and three European nations allowing for early elections, the armed ultra-nationalists who had hijacked the Maidan protests rejected the deal and led an uprising on Feb. 22 that forced Yanukovich to flee and his government to collapse. When the Europeans then abandoned their role as guarantors, a turning point was reached.

A one-day meeting of anti-Maidan supporters was held in Sevastopol as 30,000 Crimeans gathered in the center of the port city to declare that they didn’t recognize the coup government in Kiev and would not pay taxes to it. They then decided to defend Sevastopol and the Crimean isthmus with arms. They chose a people’s mayor, Aleksai Chaly, and checkpoints were set up. After extremist Tatars and Ukrainian ultra-nationalists showed up in Simferopol, throwing bottles, teargas, and beating busloads of ethnic Russians with flag poles, he said the group’s help was requested.

As the situation deteriorated further, with a standoff between local residents and local police officials who were beholden to and taking orders from Kiev underway, Mareta admitted that the Cossacks realized that theirs was a revolt that amounted to a suicide mission if Kiev gave the order to put it down with full force. “Their hearts were in it, but their minds knew they might lose,” Mareta said.

From Feb. 28 – 29, Cossacks from parts of continental Russia, including Kuban

and Don, began to arrive to reinforce the isthmus. Ukrainian planes were blocked from landing at the local airport as Russian soldiers, stationed legally in Crimea under contract, manned the gates.

Crimeans told me that it was understood at the time that the “little green men” who quietly appeared on the streets in the coming days were Russian soldiers under lease at the naval base who had donned unmarked green uniforms. The people viewed them as protectors whose presence allowed them to peacefully conduct their referendum without interference from Kiev, not as invaders.

Savitskiy described the sense of joyful surprise among Crimeans in Sevastopol regarding the eventual Russian intervention: “The Russian military was very cautious and waited for the order to intervene. It was an unexpected gift.”

Our driver in Sevastopol, who shall remain unnamed due to the fact that he has relatives in central Ukraine that he does not want to endanger, drove us to our next destination. We exchanged pleasantries and he asked us what part of the U.S. we were from. When I told him we were from San Francisco, he proceeded to serenade us with a few lines from Scott MacKenzie’s “If You’re Going to San Francisco, Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair.”

Born to a Russian mother and a Ukrainian father, he told us that he had served in the Ukrainian Navy until 2013, but he supported the reunification with Russia.

We parked in a lot near the dock at the naval base and were led a short distance over to a light beige van. A slight man with a rugged face, decked out in crisp khaki fatigues and a Putin t-shirt appeared. Nicolai Kachin gave us a tour of the interior of his taxi van which was adorned with images of places and people relevant to the “Third Defense of Sevastopol.” There were a number of photos of the Russian president.

Kachin was born in the Urals in continental Russia but had been attracted to Crimea since early childhood and considered it his “second home.” He had been working as a guide and driver when the Maidan protests were underway.

“I watched the news as the situation became more difficult in December (2013),” he said, recalling meetings among the Russian population of Crimea as things in Kiev degenerated into violence. After the events of Feb. 21, “the situation had changed. By February 23rd, the men and women of Sevastopol came out to defend the city. Chaly was elected mayor (after the Ukrainian appointed mayor was removed), seven checkpoints were set up and residents volunteered.”

He stressed his belief that, if Crimeans hadn’t taken the initiative to defend themselves against the coup in Kiev, and Putin hadn’t backed them up, their fate

would have been far worse. He said, “Sevastopol was the first city to rise up in Crimea. If residents hadn’t stood up to defend themselves, war would be raging in Crimea worse than in the Donbass.”

Kachin was awarded medals by the Russian government for his role in guarding the checkpoint outside the Ukrainian naval site until the referendum was concluded. He displayed his medals with great pride, but emphasized that the people of Sevastopol did not have glory in mind when they defended their city:

“When originally we enrolled into the self-defense units, we had no idea about awards. We did not think about it. All the city – women, men, youth – stood up to defend Sevastopol and our dignity.”

He was very pleased to be able to relate his story to Americans as most of the people who’d sought him out were Russians, along with some Ukrainians and a few Europeans.

Expressions of gratitude toward President Putin could be seen throughout Crimea in the form of billboards with his picture alongside the words “Crimea. Russia. Forever.” I asked several residents if this reflected the general sentiment of the population. They confirmed enthusiastically that it did.

A Pew poll from April 2014 revealed that 91 percent of Crimean respondents believed the referendum was free and fair, 93 percent had confidence in Putin, and 85 percent believed Kiev should recognize the results.

Another poll in June 2014, this one from Gallup, showed 94 percent of ethnic Russians in Crimea thought the referendum reflected the views of the people and 68 percent of ethnic Ukrainians in Crimea agreed. The poll found that 74 percent believed that joining Russia would make life better.

A GfK poll from February 2015, sponsored by a pro-Ukrainian group in Canada, revealed 93 percent of Crimeans endorsed the referendum.

The Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority comprising approximately 12 percent of the population, is divided on reunification. Surveys reflecting the view of Crimean Tatars specifically, or which break down opinion by ethnicity to include the Tatars, are difficult to find. Russian media has reported that 30 percent of Crimean Tatars voted in favor of reunification but it is unclear where this figure originates from.

One survey conducted jointly by Open Democracy and the Levada Center, published in March of 2015, did include Tatar opinion. Their results revealed that 50 percent of Crimean Tatars supported the referendum (30 percent generally and 20 percent absolutely) while 30 percent opposed it and 20 percent did not express

support or opposition.

There are reports from Western media and organizations that Crimea has been repressing Tatars since the reunification. The most recent report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights discusses claims of “people who were dismissed or threatened to be dismissed from their posts for refusing to take up Russian Federation passports”; concerns about due process in the trials of two high-profile defendants accused of extremism and/or terrorism; informal designation of the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Simferopol as an “extremist organization”; and, the apparent abduction, separately, of three Crimean Tatar men who have gone missing. A criminal murder investigation has been opened by Russian authorities in one of the cases.

No doubt there have been tensions since the coup in Kiev exacerbated pre-existing political and ethnic divisions across Ukraine; however, as journalist Roger Annis has pointed out, there were no repercussions when up to 20,000 Tatars took part in a rally on May 18, 2014, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of their expulsion by Stalin. This gathering was held in Simferopol in defiance of a temporary ban on mass rallies at the time by the Crimean authorities. Both *The Guardian* and *AP* reported on the rally.

However, Girey Bairov, a Tatar activist who works as a dentist in Crimea and refused to participate in the referendum, which he saw as illegitimate, explained the historical plight of the Crimean Tatars and the consequent distrust of living under Russian governance:

“Before Stalin repressions in 1944, Crimean Tatars lived in their own territory called Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Almost all names of Crimea villages and cities were of Crimean Tatar origin. We lived in our own houses. All land in collective farms belonged to us. We lost it all. While Crimean Tatar men were fighting with the Red Army against Fascists, Stalin made an order to deport all Crimea Tatar children, women and old people. All their belongings were taken away and they were thrown onto the hungry steppes of Central Asia where half of Tatar people died. From 1944 to 1989, we lived in exile, but were dreaming to return back to Crimea and everything we lost.”

In an attempt to facilitate reconciliation with Crimean Tatars, Putin issued a decree on April 21, 2014, reiterating previous public condemnations of the Stalin-era expulsion of the Tatars for allegedly collaborating with the Nazis, and calling for measures to rehabilitate the Tatars and “to restore historical justice and remove the consequences of the illegal deportation and the violations of their rights.”

Along with Russian and Ukrainian, the Tatar language is now an official language

in Crimea – something the Tatars had never achieved while under Ukrainian governance.

Putin subsequently met with representatives of Crimean Tatars on May 16, 2014. Moreover, members of the leadership of Tatarstan, a republic of the Russian Federation with approximately 4 million citizens, have met with the Tatar population of Crimea.

But Bairov said Russia is only “trying to solve the Crimean Tatar question on paper.” He said the everyday reality for Tatars is very different, including a 90 percent reduction in the number of Tatars who hold positions in authority and Tatar activists being jailed and deported.

The most visible representative of the Tatar opposition to the Crimean referendum and reunification (and most cited by Western media) is Mustafa Dzhemilev, a Soviet-era dissident and current member of the Ukrainian parliament. Some of Dzhemilev’s public statements and actions, however, would seem to call his credibility into question.

For example, he has dismissed any concerns about the neo-fascist and ultra-nationalist elements in the post-coup government in Kiev and declared that all parties in the Ukrainian parliament are “ten times more democratic” than Putin’s government.

Dzhemilev’s latest activities include a blockade of Ukrainian goods into Crimea, which is being enforced at the border in partnership with neo-fascist members of Right Sector since September. The aforementioned UN human rights report expressed concern about these blockade enforcers who were described as “uniformed men sometimes wearing masks and balaclavas [who] reportedly have lists of people considered to be ‘traitors’ due to their alleged support to the *de facto* authorities in Crimea or to the armed groups in the east.”

Incidents of beatings and property damage are cited, adding that these events occurred in the presence of police and border guards on the Ukrainian side who declined to intervene.

During that same month, Dzhemilev’s close colleague, Refat Chubarov, promised to have electricity to Crimea cut off, foreshadowing the Nov. 21, 2015 sabotaging of power lines into Crimea which caused partial or full blackouts for almost 2 million Crimeans.

The convoluted logic behind these actions is reflected in the fact that the blockade has likely caused more damage to Ukrainian producers than Crimean consumers (who have been substituting Russian and Turkish imports) or the Russian government.

Dzhemilev has a history of allying with and expressing support for dubious parties in his years' long role as the chairman of the Majlis, the unrecognized Crimean Tatar Assembly. In fact, Dzhemilev admitted in a 2012 interview with the magazine, *The Ukrainian Week*, that the Majlis had largely been ineffective in resolving the main problems of naturalization, enfranchisement and legitimization of land acquisition for the thousands of Tatars who have returned to independent Ukraine since the 1990s.

Many Tatars have returned from Uzbekistan where they already had citizenship, creating obstacles to repatriation, such as requirements to return to Uzbekistan to pay a duty and renounce Uzbek citizenship.

The Majlis' ineffectiveness contributed to a public row in 2011 with a segment of Crimean Tatars represented by a group called Sebat, which, according to the private Ukrainian television station Ukrayina, accused Dzhemilev and his deputy, Chubarov, of "betraying national interests, misappropriation [of] money and procrastinating the settlement of the land issue."

Moreover, a network of Tatar social organizations formed in 2006, known as the Milli Firqua People's Party of Crimea, denies the Majlis speaks for all or even most Crimean Tatars, citing 15-20 percent support for each of their respective organizations, with the majority of Crimean Tatars non-aligned.

The UN Refugee Agency's timeline on Crimean Tatars in Ukraine chronicles the problems that Tatars faced throughout the 1990s in newly independent Ukraine, including high unemployment, lack of access to water and electricity in homes, and the absence of paved roads in their communities. The Majlis' subsequent support for the "Orange Revolution" government of Viktor Yushchenko in 2005 yielded many promises but still no real action in the resolution of these issues.

Bairov acknowledges that the hopes of Crimean Tatars were not realized under Ukrainian governance: "While we lived in Ukraine from 1991 to 2014, we were waiting for 23 years that the Crimean Tatar question would be solved fairly. Our Ukrainian leaders convinced us that once Ukraine becomes a truly democratic state, we will have at least 36 percent of Crimean Tatars in power, as it was earlier [in 1944], the flag and coat of arms will be Crimean Tatar. But Ukraine failed to restore the rights of Crimean Tatars."

Dzhemilev claimed in 2010 that most Tatars had supported Yulia Tymoshenko in that year's elections, but also said that the Tatar community did not oppose the winner, Viktor Yanukovich, and would work with him. After supporting the coup in 2014, both Dzhemilev and Chubarov were granted appointments to the Ukrainian parliament as part of the Poroshenko Bloc, which is considered "the electoral

machine of the [current] Ukrainian president,” Petro Poroshenko.

Following this admittedly ineffectual pattern, it is unclear how implementing a blockade or advocating for the cutting of electricity to Crimea will help fellow Tatars there or put them on the road to progress. Perhaps realizing this, some leaders of the Majlis consented to the resumption of power to Crimea and allowing repairs to the lines, a move Right Sector continued to block until the Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy “Yats” Yatsenyuk announced on Dec. 16 that the blockade was now being officially endorsed by the Kiev government. Subsequently, President Poroshenko admitted to regularly meeting with Dzhemilev and Chubarov to “coordinate” the blockade.

It remains to be seen how the Crimean Tatars ultimately fare under Russian governance. Many hope that the initial gestures of reconciliation immediately after the reunification will be followed up on with substantive steps toward political and economic integration.

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig’s Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. In October of 2015, she traveled to six cities in the Russian Federation and has written several articles based on her conversations and interviews with a cross-section of Russians. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications including Consortiumnews, OpEd News, The New York Journal of Books, The Common Line, Santa Fe Sun Monthly, Dissident Voice, Energy Bulletin, Newtopia Magazine, and the Lakeshore. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and blogs at natyliesbaldwin.com
