

CRIMEA BELONGS TO RUSSIA, UKRAINE DOES NOT

What West needs to understand about Crimea

By Dmitry Tamoikin



I support the Ukrainian people in their fight against corruption and their desire for self-determination, regardless if that means closer ties with the West or the East. That said, ethnically, historically and politically Crimea does not belong to Ukraine. It is predominantly populated by Russians and pro-Russian Ukrainians. Historically it has been Russian territory since the 18th century. Lastly, the political views of the Crimean people are well represented by the Russian flags that are now nearly on every government building in Crimea. Overwhelmingly Crimean people speak, read, write and prefer the Russian language over Ukrainian. Most important of all, if given a democratic choice to stay with Ukraine or reunite with Russia, Crimean people would overwhelmingly vote to reunite with Russia.

What are my reasons for writing this article? I feel the need to speak out because I see a clear absence of English language content from the Western media that is for Crimean reunification with Russia. Even less is heard from the people that truly have the right to talk on this subject; primarily those who lived and still live in Crimea. My hope is to lead by example and start a productive discussion on this important matter.

My qualifications to talk on this subject are simple. I'm both a Canadian citizen since 1996 and a Russian citizen by birth and blood. Furthermore, my Grandmother is Ukrainian which makes me ¼ Ukrainian as well. However what really gives me the right to speak is the fact that I was born in Sevastopol, Crimea. I lived there for a long time and have a desire to live there again. To date, I have two places that I can honestly call home, they are: Halifax, Nova Scotia and Sevastopol, Crimea. Finally I have great respect for Ukrainian people and have many friends as well as business partners who you may call 100% Ukrainians. It is a wonderful country that is unfortunately going through not so wonderful times. Please keep that in mind as you read what I have to say.



Once more, Crimea needs to be reunited with Russia because of three major reasons; it is not historically, ethnically or politically Ukrainian.

Historically, Crimea is Russian. Since 18th century Crimea has been part of the Russian Empire. The Crimean War of 1853-1856, to which monuments are placed not only in London but even in Halifax (Canada), was fought between Russia and the European alliance. Russia lost and to this day, the French and the British pride themselves on winning over Russia in Crimea, not over Ukraine. To be fair, Ukraine did not exist as a nation then but many Ukrainians have fought in the war. During WWII, some of the bloodiest battles were fought in Crimea, especially those when Soviet force were taking the region back from the Nazis. Russians and Ukrainians as well as soldiers of other nationalities fought and died side by side in Crimea, yet no one ever questioned that

Crimea belonged to anyone else, other than RSFSR. Even when it was technically given to Ukrainian SSR in 1954, everyone considered Crimea a Russian territory simply because it was predominantly populated by the Russians.

Ethnically Crimea is nearly 60% Russian, 20% Ukrainian, who are mainly pro-Russian, and roughly 14% Tatars. Other minorities are there as well and mostly support Russian reunification. Because historically Crimea has been Russian, and under modern Ukraine pro-Russian, most Ukrainians that do not like Russia have either moved out of Crimea or do not move there to live, in the first place. That is the reality of the situation. Only the Tatars who consider Crimea as their historic land, do not, on mass scale, support reunification with Russia. Their reasons I will discuss later in detail.

Politically, Crimean people are stuck with Ukraine but are looking high and low for ways out. Under the Ukrainian “management”, Crimea has suffered extensively, while a similar by climate Russian regions, like Sochi, have not just prospered extensively but held 2014 Olympic Winter Games. That tells something. Under the Ukrainian rule the people of Crimea felt isolated and racially discriminated against, and forgotten by the central Kiev government; clashes between Russian and Tatars population has only escalated, while the government has done almost nothing to prevent them; the unique ecosystem and natural beauty of Crimea has been neglected and irreversibly damaged, pollution is wide spread and is a big problem; finally extensive poverty and criminal activity has flourished in Crimea making it the worst criminal region in Ukraine. Due to these and many other pressing reasons the Crimean people no longer have confidence in the Ukrainian government.

Many Westerners may get the idea that Crimea is a state like any other in Ukraine, and it now wishes to go rogue, thus breaking the country apart. That is not the case. What most people call Crimea is technically called an Autonomous Republic of Crimea and it is unlike any other region in Ukraine. First of all it has its own constitution, which currently accepts the Ukrainian law, but can be amended not to, by a referendum. Second, the title “Autonomous Republic” is there for a reason as well. Basically it means that Crimea is allowed a wide range of self-governance while wilfully remaining part of the Ukraine. At a certain point Crimea even had its own president, however later he was removed and many self-governing aspects of Crimea were taken away by Kiev. The wilful aspect is dissipating rapidly and all that Crimea has to do is hold a referendum to leave Ukraine. Now that is a very realistic scenario. This by the way is not a new idea to the West, nor should it be frowned upon. For example, many Canadians know that Quebec, a predominantly French speaking province, twice have held a legitimate referendum, first in 1980 and second in 1995, to separate from Canada. It lost both times in a fair, open and democratic way. Crimea is no different in its right to hold such a referendum. Win or lose then will be solely up to the people. Now that is exactly what is taking place where people of Crimea want the same option to vote on whether to remain with Ukraine or reunite with Russia. In a democratic society, to which Ukraine is clearly striving, that choice must be given, if not to every province or state, then surely to provinces, states or republics that have autonomous status. The only thing that needs to be added is that under current conditions in Ukraine, Crimea is no longer asking, it is telling.



What about the Ukrainian people in the rest of the country? Don't they have the right to decide their future, how to live their lives, what language to speak and with whom to ally. Don't they get to vote on the Crimean issue? To be blunt – no they don't. They would if Crimea was not an Autonomous Republic, but it is and that allows it to be a country within a country. By the way an almost identical right was in fact given to Quebec after its two attempts to separate. Needless to say, the majority of Crimean people are not Ukrainian. They are predominantly Russian and they also have the right to choose their future, how to live their lives, what language to speak and with whom to ally.

Some point out that Crimea is not connected to Russia while it is connected to Ukraine. To that there is a very simple answer: just like Alaska to United States, or Kaliningrad to Russia, Crimea has no problem with being disconnected from Russia by land while reuniting with it. It is as simple as that and it has been done before by other developed nations.

Now it is very important for me to say the following: Russia has no right to take Crimea by force. What it has the right to do is accept Crimea into the Federation should Crimean people do two things: (A) on their own, separate themselves from Ukraine and (B) ask to join the Russian Federation.

What are the arguments against Crimean separation from Ukraine? There are two and only one that is valid. The first, the non-valid argument is pride. Ukraine feels like it is a small country next to big Russia, and it sees that losing any more territory is a sign of weakness. In all fairness I agree, however we are not talking about material things. There are real people in Crimea whose wishes must be placed before any pride or political agenda. Above that these people have the right to separate and now they also have the will to do so. On to the actual argument that holds some merit. In 1954 Crimea was given by Nikita Khrushchev to Ukrainian SSR. Upon collapse of the USSR, Crimea remained as part of the Ukrainian territory by default. That is how Crimea ended up in Ukraine, as

a goodwill gift, which was very common in USSR. At that time it may have been acceptable. Now it is not. Furthermore it was a clear mistake on behalf of an incompetent government and political system; a system, meaning Soviet rule, which the current highly nationalistic Ukrainian Government ferociously opposes, by the way. Just recently, countless statues of Lenin (creator of USSR), that are found in almost every city in Ukraine were aggressively torn down on nationwide scale. That it is simply hypocritical to blame USSR and Russia for all ills, and at the same time depend solely on Soviet legislation when it comes to the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. You can't have it both ways, and now the people of Crimea are forcing Ukraine to make that choice.

Ukraine must allow Crimea, who is after all autonomous, just like Canada allowed Quebec, to decide its own future by democratic referendum. That is what democratic countries do.

There is no doubt, should Crimea join the Russian Federation, almost all of its people will be better off. That is a fact. They will be better paid, have lower crime rates, have better social securities, have better medical care, have much stronger economy and over all much more happy people. In turn there is no doubt that under Ukrainian rule, Crimea is guaranteed to experience the full downturn of the Ukrainian economy, segregation and forceful integration of its predominantly Russian population (which will resist) and of course little protection against evermore radical Muslim Tatars. The fact of the matter is this, behind closed doors Ukrainian leaders do not care about Crimea, they see it as enemy state and will always put other Ukrainian regions first. Personally I think they have every right to do so, because the above said is true in reverse. Crimean people do not much care for Ukraine and will always put Crimean interests first. This dislike of one another is exactly why Crimea needs to separate. This is especially true of all new Kiev leaders that are now coming to power. In fact now, more than ever, they are set against the Russians, since they not only don't support them but are a real threat to new administration.

About Viktor Yanukovich. He is or was a legitimate and constitutional president of Ukraine. That said, he is perhaps the most corrupt president this country ever had and the Ukrainian people had every right to rebel against his oppression. He unquestionably mismanaged the country, and let all people of Ukraine down by abandoning them in the time when they needed their president the most. Above all he failed as the president of the Ukraine on all levels, especially political, social and economical. Under his rule Ukraine was an oligarchic state. Perhaps to the surprise of many Western media organizations, that is exactly how most Crimean people feel about Viktor Yanukovich. Where they differ in opinion was how this removal from power and subsequent division of that power should have been handled. But that is all said and done. Now Crimean people have to deal with the reality of the current situation.

Why does Russia have no claim on Ukraine itself? That is simple. Ukrainian people, although very similar, are a different nation, some may say, a different tribe. Ukrainians speak a different language that in many ways resembles a mix between Russian and Polish. Ukrainians have similar yet distinct culture, and if you ask both Russians and

Ukrainians, they will tell you they are unquestionably different from one another. To put this into perspective for Western readers, these differences are much more than the differences between Americans, Canadians, Brits or Australians. These differences clearly define each nation and based on these differences each nation recognise each other. Western people must understand that, in order to fully grasp what is happening in Ukraine.

Overwhelmingly, Ukrainian people do not want to be part of Russia and it is their right which must be respected and it is. Ukraine was given full autonomy, without objections, by Russia in 1991. For the exact reason Crimea must be given the right to choose whether to be part of Ukraine, become independent or reunite with Russia.

In light of all this talk about division I wish to be absolutely clear. To me it is unthinkable that two brotherly nations would take up arms against each other over political disputes that have questionable origins. That must be avoided at all cost, even if that means Crimea is to remain with Ukraine.

The only minority that is against Crimean reunification with Russia are the Muslim Tatars. The reason for that is clear. The Tatars ultimately wish to have Crimea as their own autonomous Muslim state, similar to Chechnya in Russia, but preferably not even as part of Ukraine or any other nation. Under the much stronger Russian government, Tatars feel that the chances of such state are impossible to achieve while under any Ukrainian government, especially a pro-European one, their chances are very high. That is their primary reason for resisting any reunification with Russia. Other reasons include religion. The age old conflict of Muslims vs Christians is still very much a reality in Crimea. There are historic reasons as well. Tatars and the Ottoman Empire were defeated by the Russians on multiple occasions, eventually losing Crimea completely in the 18th century. That history created a lot of bitterness in the Tatars and a great desire to regain supremacy in the region some day. Something that they have been in fact doing successfully so far, even under Yanukovich's rule!

All of this said, Tatars are the minority and although their human rights must be respected, they cannot dictate to the majority of Crimean residents on what course of action is best for the majority. Tatars do have the right to vote and persuade others to their cause, but if they lose they must respect the wishes of the majority of the people which are clearly choosing to side with Russia. What needs to be added is that a lot of Ukrainians that live in the central Ukraine, do not fully know or understand this Tatars vs Russians rivalry in Crimea, however it is an issue that, if not dealt with, may also have the potential for civil armed conflict, much similar to the war between Christian Serbs and Muslim Albanians. Neither past (again, including Yanukovich's gov't) nor current administrations offered any realistic solutions to this now escalating problem. Most likely only Russia can do that, and that is why both Crimean Russian and Ukrainian population is so eager to join Russia. For them it very well may be the difference between war and peace.

All Westerners that think that Crimean people should remain with Ukraine should ask themselves if they personally would want to live under the rule of any past or current Ukrainian government. Would they relocate from their nation to live and work in Ukraine right now or in the near future? I certainly would not and I think, predominantly, the answer of most Canadians, Americans or Europeans would be the same. At the same time many Westerners live and work in Russia, which is not perfect but is very profitable to many top international businessmen. If that is the case, which it is, no one other than the Crimean people have the right to decide under which rule they should live. And one is clearly better for them than the other. If Crimean people suddenly decided that they should be part of Canada, that is their right, the question would arise, if Canada will accept a new province to its territory. The answer to this silly question is - no. Interestingly enough, the only other country that would take Crimea and all of its people, problems and debt is – Russia. If Crimea, on its own separates from Ukraine, Russia would unquestionably accept it as part of its territory. Why? The answer is clear. It was Russian territory until 1954, majority of the population there is Russian and would gladly accept Russian passports, and finally the people of the Russian Federation would welcome this long awaited reunion as well.

With all above said, it is easy to analyze and debate although much harder to give a clear call for action and then stand behind it, for better or worse. At the risk of ridicule from my pro-western colleagues I shall do just that. My proposition to Crimea, to Ukraine, to Russia and to the West is as follows: Russia suspends its attempts to force Ukraine back into the pre-existing geopolitical alliance and allows Ukraine on its own to determine its future, even if it includes closer ties with the West. In turn, Ukraine must allow Crimean people the freedom to vote if they wish to be part of Russia, Ukraine or form their own nation.

I have no doubt that if such an option was presented, Crimea would join the Russian Federation. Ironically, it is highly unlikely that Crimean people would have done so without the Kiev uprising, and yet following the example of Euromaidan they are doing just that. Kiev protesters truly have given a historic opportunity to the Crimean people that otherwise they may never have had.



Dmitry Tamoikin,

Russian Crimea Movement / www.RusKrim.com

CEO of ESDC / www.EarthSphereDevelopment.com

Owner of Soviet Jewelry / www.SovietJewelry.com

Halifax, NS, Canada

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