

The Crimean conundrum: What has happened and what to expect in the future

Oleksandr Fisun

V.N. Karazin Kharkhiv National University

Introduction: The geopolitical context

The Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in the spring of 2014 has become a turning point in the development of the system of international relations established after the end of the Cold War. In fact, it represents a radical transformation of the system of international security on the European continent and in the wider context of the postwar “Yalta system” of interstate boundaries and their guarantees by major international players. The most important takeaway is that for the first time since World War II, one of the founders of the Yalta system of international boundaries has considered it within the realm of possibility to revisit its provisions by directly augmenting its own territory. Russia is, in fact, retreating from its own guarantees for the inviolability of Ukraine’s borders, as agreed upon in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum upon Ukraine’s promise to surrender its nuclear arsenal. Russia has demonstrated its readiness not only to advance its foreign policy goals through military operations, but also through the direct annexation of a territory belonging to one of its neighboring states; this constitutes a fundamentally new aspect of Russian foreign policy.

Based on this analytical perspective, this paper aims to analyze the outcomes of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the features of the newly formed regional political regime in Crimea, the role of Crimea in contemporary Ukrainian politics, as well as to present scenarios for the development of the geopolitical situation surrounding the “Crimean issue” in the context of the possible actions that primary geopolitical players may take.¹

2. The Kremlin’s strategy in Crimea: Economics vs. Ideology

One year after Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the problem that Crimea’s economic dependence poses has become abundantly clear; this dependence derives from the peninsula’s critical dependence on mainland Ukraine for logistical support, as well as food, water, and electrical energy supplies. It is obvious that in the medium term, in order to neutralize Crimea’s dependence on mainland Ukraine, Russia will front the economic costs instead. Thus according to Russian economist Nikolai Zubarevich, at the end of 2014, the transfer from the Russian federal budget to the Crimean peninsula totaled 125 billion rubles. Crimea’s budget is comprised of 85 percent subsidy from the Russian Federation; Sevastopol’s, 70 percent. Crimea thus became the Federation’s most highly subsidized subject in 2014.²

¹ The author wishes to express his gratitude to political expert Andrei Sambros for his consultations about the nuances of the contemporary economic and political situation in Crimea. Special thanks to my discussant for the Crimea section, Prof. Kimberly Marten, for her valuable input, as well as to the rest of the conference participants for an atmosphere of fruitful discussion.

² For analysis in greater detail, see Fyodor Stoyanov, “Natalya Zubarevich: Vsyta komanda, kotoraya upravlyayet Krymom, budet kozlom otpushcheniya” *Krymr.realii* (October 20, 2015). <http://ru.krymr.com/content/article/27316544.html>; Denar Suleimanov, “Krym stal odnym iz samykh dorogikh regionov dlya federalnoi kasny” *Vedomosti* (June 18, 2015).

The Crimean region is, generally speaking, unprofitable, and no opportunities to escape the yoke of subsidization will present themselves in the near future. As such, it will retain around 60-80 percent of its resource dependence on Ukraine – specifically, its food and water supplies and electrical energy. On the other hand, because of sanctions against the Russian Federation, foreign companies, banks, and international payment systems have shrunk drastically in Crimea, while powerful Russian players are in no hurry to expand their presence on the peninsula. Due to the lack of goods traffic, the Yevpatoria and Feodosia ports have planned temporary closures.

Crimea's tourist industry—one of the pillars of the Crimean economy—has experienced a steep decline. Only a few years ago, tourism contributed 6 million to the GDP, real evaluations of the 2014 tourist season range from 1.5 to 2.5 million people; mostly due to a sharp decrease in tourist flow from Ukraine. Crimean resorts (spas, hotels, vacation homes) usually take in 1.2 million from vacationers and another 4.8 million from the private sector. Now the peninsula faces the collapse of the system of renting private residences as the result of certain features of industry regulation in the Russian legislature. Real forecasts for tourist flow in 2015 suggest about 1.5 to 2 million tourists, which primarily fills the “organized vacation” segment (spas, hotels, vacation homes). After the closure of transport links to Ukraine (especially air and rail), the Crimean government has not succeeded in reorienting the transportation system towards Russian tourists, due to the limited carrying capacity of the Kerch ferry (250-300,000 people) and of the Simferopol airport (500,000 people).³

The bottleneck for Crimean integration into Russia is the lack of a reliable land link between Crimea and Russia, which remains impossible in the absence of construction of a land bridge across the Kerch strait. In any case, such a bridge is inextricably linked to the legal status of the Kerch strait's waters, which cannot be resolved without Ukraine's express participation; in addition, the project demands a multibillion-ruble investment, and, in the most optimistic scenario, 4 to 5 years for completion. Thus in the short term, Crimea remains an transport and logistics “island,” tied to Ukraine by vital food supplies and electricity needs. Without prolonging the special “transition period” for Crimea within the Russian Federation – and the broader economic ties with Ukraine – Crimea's independent survival will prove impossible.

At the same time, in Russian political discourse the factor of the negative impact of sanctions, Crimea's critical dependence on federal subsidies, and the deteriorating economic situation is leveled out by the symbolic significance of the Crimean peninsula belonging to Russia.

<https://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2015/06/18/596848-vsem-dorogoi-krim>; "Vo skol'ko Rossii obkhodit'sya Krym" *Capital* (March 16, 2015)

<http://www.capital.ua/ru/publication/42408-vo-skolko-rossii-obkhoditsya-krym-1>.

³ Andrei Sambros, "Kurortnyi sezon – 2015. Krymskaya logistika." *Krymr.realii* (April 10, 2015).

<http://ru.krymr.com/content/article/26948658.html>; Andrei Sambros, "Poluostrov nadezhd. Kakim budet kurortnyi sezon v Krymu?" *Spektr* (April 13, 2015).

<http://spektr.press/poluostrov-nadezhd-kakim-budet-kurortnyj-sezon-v-krymu/>; Petro Volchenko, "Podvig otdykhayushchego." *Profil'* (May 20, 2015), <http://www.profil.ru/obsch/item/96782-podvig-otdykhayushchego>.

In modern Russian political discourse, Crimea is perceived as a symbol of the Russian empire's and the USSR's military and political achievements; over the course of the last year, this discourse transformed significantly and acquired a fundamentally new meaning. Here it becomes necessary to examine a few important moments.

First, over the past year, the phrase “reunification of Russia and Crimea” has gained traction. In Soviet and post-Soviet Russian political discourse, the term “reunification” has referred exclusively to Ukraine (as in the Pereyaslav Agreement of 1654).

Second, in his address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on December 4, 2014, Vladimir Putin emphasized Crimea's sacred and civilizational importance for Russia, linking it with Vladimir the Great, and seeing in Crimea the origins of Eastern Orthodox Christianity: “For Russia, Crimea – Ancient Korsun or Hersonissos – and Sevastopol have an immense sacral and civilizational significance, just as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem does for believers in Judaism and Islam. That is precisely how we shall relate to this, now and forever.” In fact, this represents a revision of the ideological and socio-cultural foundations of Russian statehood, inasmuch as the traditional sacred and cultural center of the Russian state was Kyiv, a place directly linked with Vladimir the Great.

Russia's annexation of Crimea has incurred significant costs; moreover, it has formed a fundamentally new perception of Crimea in political discourse, which extrapolates to the peninsula a range of structures characteristic for the perception and positioning of Ukraine and also lays down a new line in Russian society, distinguishing between those who recognize that “Crimea is ours” and those who do not. The annexation of Crimea has proved to be linked directly not only with the vast revision of traditional versions of Russian and Soviet history (with Sevastopol representing the alpha and omega of all victories and successes), but also with the development of a new “imperial” ideology, “Krymnashizm [Crimea-is-ours-ism],” the crystallization of new symbolic points of Russian identity: Crimea and Sevastopol acting as the new cornerstones for contemporary Russian self-identification and a means for separating “us” from “them,” of defining both internal and external “friends” and “foes.” In this sense, the formation of the “Krymnashizm” ideology as a new national consensus that underlies the current Putin regime in the mid-term outweighs the (yet to be fully realized) economic costs of Crimea's integration into Russia.

3. The Crimean regional political regime: a patrimonial “tandemocracy”?

Crimean internal policy has realized the classic paradigm of the “patrimonialization” of power, in which control over territory and management operations are parceled out to local political clans and local client-partner networks. In fact, the local regional clans have maintained their position, simply changing their Ukrainian party signs into Russian ones, transitioning from a Ukrainian “party of power” to a Russian one. The republic is de facto implementing the “soft” form of the “Chechen” model of regional governance, wherein territory is parceled out to local clans in exchange for control over territory (in

this respect, the semi-institutionalized status of Crimea's "self-defense" forces, which function as an autonomous power resource for local elites, is quite typical).⁴

The new balance of power and the regime of patrimonial tandemocracy were established after the local elections on September 14, 2014, the first held under Russian jurisdiction. According to their results, representatives from only two parties were elected to the State Council of the Republic: the Liberal Democratic Party (8.49 percent) and United Russia (70.18 percent). The voting took place under a mixed electoral system: 50 seats were allocated through a system of proportional representation, and another 25 through majority constituencies (winner takes all) in a simple one-round system.

As a result, United Russia received 70 seats, and the Liberal Democrats received 5, since, as expected, Russian candidates from the "party of power" won in all the majority constituencies. Other participants in the electoral process — the Communist Party (which garnered 4.48 percent), "Rodina" (2.65 percent), "Communists of Russia" (2.11 percent), "Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice" (RPPR, 1.93 percent), "A Just Russia" (1.84 percent), the Democratic Party (DPR, 1.32 percent), and "Patriots of Russia" (1.17 percent) — did not attract enough votes to overcome the 5 percent barrier. The vote took place with standardly low turnout for Crimea (53.61 percent), which was comparable for the regional turnout during the Ukrainian elections.

The results of the campaign definitively formed the regime of patrimonial tandemocracy presided over by Sergei Aksyonov and Vladimir Konstantinov, which first appeared during the March 2014 referendum. Konstantinov, who earlier had been the speaker of the regional parliament and one of the leaders of the then-ruling party (Party of Regions), was able to preserve his position by decamping to United Russia. Aksyonov secured the role as head of the Republic and significantly increased the number of representatives from his faction (a small regional party, "Russian Unity," and its satellites) throughout all echelons of the Crimean government.⁵

Despite the fact that Aksyonov and Konstantinov represent a sole political force and work in the standard (for the RF) power structure in which parliament is a subsidiary organ for the head of the Republic, the real political competition takes place precisely within this tandem. At present, we can speak of interest groups within the Crimean parliament divided between Konstantinov's and Aksyonov's client-patron networks roughly equally.

The principle of equal distribution of seats on the list and in majority constituencies is clearly visible in the quotas on the top ten. In Konstantinov's group, there's Konstantinov

⁴ See, for example, Mark Galeotti, "Crime and Crimea: Criminals as Allies and Agents," in *Russia Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society Police Papers* (October 31, 2014). <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Crime-and-Crimea.pdf>. For a discussion of patrimonial relationships in the post-Soviet space in general, and in Ukraine in particular, see Oleksandr Fisun, "Rethinking Post-Soviet Politics from a Neopatrimonial Perspective." *Democratizatsiya. The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring 2012): 87-96.

⁵ For analysis in greater detail, see Andrei Sambros, "Chto izmenili v Krymu pervye vybory." *Slon* (September 16, 2014). https://slon.ru/world/chto_izmenili_v_krymu_pervye_vybory-1157947.xhtml.

himself, Remzi Ilyasov (ex-member of the Mejlis), Konstantin Baharev (vice-speaker of the Party of Regions), Larisa Georgiadi (who works for the company “Consol,” after having left the Party of Regions), and Oksana Sergienko (“Consol,” Konstantinov’s personal assistant). Aksyonov’s party quota is filled by Andrei Kozenko (a functionary of the defunct party Russian Unity), Evgeniy Dobrynia (Aksyonov’s relative), Vladimir Bobkov (Russian Unity), Sergei Tsekov (Federal Council member and one of the former leaders of Russian Unity), as well as Aksyonov himself.⁶

As political scientist Andrei Sambros has observed, this delicate balance of power between a group of former regionals and a team of MPs personally loyal to Sergei Aksyonov skews in favor of the head of the republic, thanks to a small faction of the Liberal Democratic Party, led by Sergei Shuvainikov, Aksyonov’s longtime ally in Russian Unity, created back in Ukrainian times (the actual leaders of this organization were Shuvainikov, Tsekov, and Aksyonov).⁷

It is thus important to emphasize that a formal party affiliation does not fully illuminate the system of relations in the Crimean government. The highest value in the system of patrimonial tandemocracy is control over the finance budget for major projects, since, as Crimea is a totally subsidized region, precisely those federal influxes represent the most crucial interest from the point of view of potential rent-seeking opportunities.

Thus Sergei Donich, an official close to Konstantinov, formerly of the Party of Regions, who was, in Ukrainian times, Crimea’s Minister of Health and Vice-Speaker under Konstantinov, led the polls in the local elections with the party “Patriots of Russia.”⁸ Despite the fact that this political party flatlined, Donich was appointed rector of the United Federal Crimean University, which until 2020 is due to receive over 32 billion rubles from Russia’s federal budget.

Consequently, there are two primary methods for reproducing positions of power in the existing model of the regional political regime: control over federal financial flows and a quota distribution of posts in the “party of power” between patrimonially recruited functionaries in Konstantinov’s client-patron network (i.e., former members of the Party of Regions as well as his business partners) and those in Aksyonov’s patronage network (i.e., his relatives and business partners who have migrated from Russian Unity).

A series of corruption scandals, which rocked the foundation of the Crimean tandem (i.e., the Konstantinov-Aksyonov tandem) in the summer of 2015, led to the intensified struggle for resources provided by the federal target program for the development of Crimea and Sevastopol, which amounts to 708 billion rubles, planned through 2020.⁹ In June 2015, the Federal Security Service detained the Minister of Industrial Policy, Andrei

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Andrei Sambros, “O vysshei shkole v Krymu: kak delali KFU i ubili KGMU.” *Krymr.realii* (March 9, 2015). <http://ru.krymr.com/content/article/26889976.html>.

⁹ See Andrei Sambros, “Den’gi ushli v spyachku.” *Novaya Gazeta* (October 21, 2015). <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/economy/70416.html>.

Skrynnik, and the director of the Federal Tax Service of Russia for the Republic of Crimea, Nikolai Kochanov, and the Main Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of Russia brought a criminal case against former Transport Minister Anatoliy Tsurkin. Other officials in the Aksyonov-Konstantinov tandem took a hit from Russian law enforcement agencies, which led to a new wave of dismissals (in particular, Minister of Resorts and Tourism Elena Yurchenko, Minister of Property and Land Relations Aleksandr Gorodetsky, and Minister of Economy Nikolai Korzazhkin).¹⁰ In June 2015, Moscow liquidated its Ministry of Crimean Affairs and transferred its basic powers to the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, which will become the primary administrator of funds for the federal target program. Moscow's policy bears witness to attempts limit the influence of the Aksyonov-Konstantinov tandem and to avert a potential "Chechen scenario," in which the control of cash flows to regional clans from the center. This is evidenced, in particular by Moscow's speedy response in quashing Aksyonov's attempt to create a special commission for reviewing the legality of holding officials criminally liable, which would have de facto removed them from the center's jurisdiction. In fact, the Aksyonov-Konstantinov tandem, unlike Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, does not possess a significant power base that would facilitate a dialogue with Moscow; Moscow's bureaucratic streamlining, which led to the removal of the most odious and corrupt officials in summer 2015, marked the limits of bargaining with the center. In fact, the only maneuver left to the Aksyonov-Konstantinov tandem is to pit the different "towers" of the Kremlin against one another and attempt to enter into short-term alliances with Moscow patrons.

4. The metamorphosis of Ukrainian policy towards Crimea

In general, the policies implemented by the Ukrainian government over the course of 2014-2015 appeared inconsistent and haphazard. In response to the actual loss of control over the territory of Crimea, the Ukrainian government was compelled to radically revisit its "social contract" with denizens of the peninsula. It was enshrined in a number of legal acts, the most important and resonant of which were the following:

1. The law "On ensuring the rights and freedoms of the citizens and of the legal regime in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine," which came into force on May 15, 2014. This law represented the first reaction to the actual occupation of the peninsula and took a more tactical approach. Along with more general political declarations, Ukraine a) tried to answer Russia's traditional strategy of distributing Russian passports (non-recognition of forced citizenship in the RF, deliberation over procedures for crossing the Crimean border with Ukrainian documentation); b) prepared for the upcoming special elections (residents of Crimea gained the ability to vote in polling stations on mainland Ukraine); and c) it partially admitted its loss of control the administration of justice (it denied all responsibility for human rights violations in the territory of Crimea).

¹⁰ See Petr Volchenko, "V Krymu – oblachno, dozhdi, mestami – posadki." *Profil'* (July 13, 2015). <http://www.profile.ru/rossiya/item/98336-v-krymu-oblachno-dozhdi-mestami-posadki>; Andrei Sambros, "Kardovye chistki v Krymu: chto eto bylo." *Novaya Gazeta* (July 8, 2015). <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/69122.html>.

2. The law “On the creation of a free economic zone in Crimea and on the features of economic activity in the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine,” which came into force on September 27, 2014. This law de facto recognized Ukraine’s loss of control over the peninsula’s economy and took a more strategic approach. In this document, the territory of Crimea for a period of ten years is declared a free economic zone, in which Ukraine abstains from key levers of influence on its economy: a) taxation (no national taxes and fees are charged in Crimea); b) economic borders (the movement of goods across the border with Crimea is practically equal with regard to export/import); and c) the debt burden (a rejection of state guarantees for loans to Crimea and Sevastopol). In fact, the law legalized the work of Ukrainian oligarchic businesses in Crimea, and also green-lighted economic ties with the Crimean peninsula in terms of electrical energy, food, and other supplies.

3. The resolution of the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) “On the application of certain provisions of currency legislation during the regime of temporary occupation of the territory of the free economic zone of Crimea,” which came into force on November 5, 2014. This resolution was dictated above all by demands of national security and represented an attempt to prevent emergent risks, for example, the financing of terrorism. This resolution a) significantly limited the circulation of Russian rubles (it banned loans and deposits in rubles, limited sums permitted to be carried across the border with Crimea) and also b) introduced additional control over Crimean residents’ financial operations (in terms of their financial activities, Crimean residents are tantamount to non-residents of Ukraine, and removing this limitation requires a change in registration). On December 16, 2014, the NBU revised its resolution and gave inhabitants of Crimea the status of residents once again (if they could produce documents verifying their residence on the territory of mainland Ukraine).

It should be added that in February 2015, Ukraine introduced a border regime, not only in the ATO zone in the east of the country, but also in territories adjacent to Crimea, the Novotroitsk and Chaplinsky districts of the Kherson oblast, as well as eliminating the railroad link with the Crimean peninsula from mainland Ukraine (in particular, in January 2015, trains were cancelled from Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk to the nearest Ukrainian railroad station to Crimea, Novooleksiivka). Resolution №367 of Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers, passed on June 4, 2015, concerning the order of train departures and arrivals from the occupied territory of Crimea, further exacerbated the situation for Ukrainian citizens by requiring, for example, that underage children cross the administrative border with Crimea only upon presentation of a foreign-travel passport (or a parent’s foreign-travel passport, if that information was submitted before April 1, 2015).¹¹

Unfortunately, these measures by and large had the greatest impact on those Crimean citizens most loyal to Ukraine, tied to Ukraine by work or study. These examples testify to Kyiv’s lack of a coherent and consistent strategy regarding Crimea.

¹¹ See Valentina Samar, “Svobodnaya ekonomicheskaya blokada.” *Zerkalo nedeli* (June 19, 2015). <http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/svobodnaya-ekonomicheskaya-blokada-.html>.

In fact, Ukraine has still created neither a ministry nor a special governmental body within the executive branch, which would address the problems of Crimean citizens and serve their administrative needs. In May 2015, Arseniy Yatsenyuk appointed Deputy Chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people Aslan Omer Kirimli director of Ukraine's State Service for issues of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and City of Sevastopol. According to numerous experts, this body's status and powers clearly do not suffice to resolve the economic, social, administrative, and humanitarian problems that have accumulated.¹²

An important element of Ukrainian politics may now be playing the "passport card," namely, the important fact that, having become Russian citizens, a large part (excluding members of law enforcement agencies and public officials), more than 2 million of Crimea's inhabitants have retained their Ukrainian passports, which has created ample opportunities for Ukraine's active play in the region. Ukraine should not focus on the fact that 2 million of its people have de facto become Russian citizens, but rather on the fact that they have not renounced their Ukrainian citizenship. Precisely the preservation of close economic, civil-administrative, and educational ties with Crimea may guarantee a more active future for Kyiv's policy in Crimea.

Why did Ukraine lose control over Crimea so quickly? An important historical-sociological observation may add to the existing geopolitical and political-cultural explanations. In institutional theory, there exists an important difference between the so-called "nomadic" and "settled" bandit. In the model of the nomadic bandit, elites' incomes are unstable; however, elites have no need to bargain with the population under their control. In the settled-bandit model, the situation is reversed: the elites have stable incomes, but this stability is based on some kind of contract with society. This difference can be fleshed out by yet another model, which combines the advantages of the two aforementioned, and does away with their shortcomings: a settled bandit with a nomadic population. This model can be used to describe the political structures in tourist regions like Crimea. In this model, elites, on the one hand, have a stable source for the extraction of resources and are thus able to create intricate political infrastructure, and, on the other hand, may ignore the social contract, because they rely on external sources of income – that is, a nomadic population (in this case, tourists), which places no political demands on local elites. As such, control (the protectorate) over such regions by a central authority thus tends to be quite weak, and in fact derives its power from this narrow elite group's loyalty to the center.

Indeed, Kyiv has lost the loyalty of Crimean elites; however, interestingly, establishing a dialogue with the local population may in fact prove crucial to returning the peninsula to Ukraine's control. This strategy proved partially effective in the case of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and may spread to other sectors of Crimean civil society. Truthfully, the paradox of the situation lies in the fact that Ukraine forfeited its function as a "minimal state" (the guarantee of security and property, taxation, and border control); however, it may still use the levers of a "maximal state" (i.e., offer Crimean civil society cooperation

¹² Dmitriy Krivtsun, "Krym: vozvrashchenie..." *Den'* (May 18, 2015).
<http://www.day.kiev.ua/ru/article/podrobnosti/krym-vozvrashchenie>.

initiatives, taking into account its political/economic/administrative needs, etc.) – to a large extent, precisely because almost the entire population of Crimea (excluding the “service” sector) possesses a Ukrainian passport, and thus, de facto, Ukrainian citizenship.

A new round of developments is connected with the blockade of commercial traffic between Ukraine and Crimea, which began on September 20, 2015, initiated by Crimean Tatar leaders Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov and supported by a number of Ukrainian nationalist organizations. The economic aim of this action consists of the blockade of supplies of Ukrainian goods to the Crimean market; the political goal is to return the Crimean issue to the international agenda and to the list of pressing items in Ukraine’s political agenda. In a broader context, it’s designed to change the current status quo, which was established after the September 2014 adoption of the law creating a free economic zone in Crimea. On one hand, the law created a corrupt mechanism for rent-seeking for powerful Ukrainian corporations which have already begun active work on the Crimean market. Over the 11 months since the enactment of the law on the free economic zone of Crimea, 1,040.525 million dollars worth of goods were delivered to it, according to Ukraine’s State Fiscal Service.¹³ On the other hand, social organizations have demanded the repeal of discriminatory provisions that transformed citizens of Ukraine registered in Crimea into non-residents, thus equating them to foreign nationals. On September 24, 2015, President Poroshenko gave the order to submit a law to the Verkhovna Rada that would abolish the free economic zone in Crimea; a number of political parties have already submitted bills to the Verkhovna Rada regarding this matter.¹⁴

In fact, over the course of 2016-2017, a new model of the “social contract” should be developed between Ukrainian citizens living in Crimea and Ukraine. Constitutional reform and the process of decentralization, which President Poroshenko has launched, provide several options for Crimea’s socio-political place in the Ukrainian polity, beginning with the transformation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea into a self-governing Crimean Tatar nation, and ending with the aggressive inclusive policy of including Ukrainian citizens who live in Crimea in the Ukrainian political process. This constitutional experimentation facilitates the creation of a more favorable negotiating position for talks with the Russian Federation regarding the future status of Crimea and strategies for its return to the Ukrainian government’s jurisdiction.

5. Scenarios for the evolving situation surrounding Crimea

Most analysts have concluded that in the short- to medium- term, the chances of returning Crimea to Ukraine are minimal. As such, the Ukrainian government should consider a range of alternatives that would allow it to reap the maximum benefit from a situation it cannot control. If open recognition of the legitimacy of the existing status quo is

¹³ See Valentina Samar, “Lupayte syu skalu!” *Zerkalo nedeli* (September 25, 2015). http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/lupayte-syu-skalu-_.html

¹⁴ See Valentina Samar, “Krym: mezhdru peresheikom i Bankovoi.” *Zerkalo nedeli* (October 9, 2015). http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/krym-mezhdru-peresheykom-i-bankovoy-_.html

tantamount to electoral collapse for representatives of the Ukrainian power elite, then agreement to take the “Crimean issue” off the table may constitute one element of the negotiation process with Russia and Europe. Objectively evaluating Ukraine’s actual international subjectivity and its degree of influence on the situation may bring about the rather pessimistic and pragmatic conclusion that the “Crimean issue” (but not Crimea itself!) may find its maximum use as a bargaining chip.

In the current geopolitical situation, several scenarios for the development of the situation around Crimea may play out:

“Peace in exchange for Crimea”: Due to the persistence and complexity of international conflicts in the Middle East, the growth of military capabilities in China and East Asia, and the presence of a potential threat for conflict between Russia and NATO over the use of nuclear weapons, the “Crimean issue” is removed from the international agenda in exchange for Russia’s support for Western actions in other geopolitical arenas, namely Syria and China. The Russian Federation completes construction of the Kerch strait bridge and de facto integrates Crimea into Russia in terms of economics, logistics, and transport. In this scenario, Crimea becomes a kind of bargaining chip in talks between Russia and the West regarding the de-escalation of violence in eastern Ukraine and the restoration of central-governmental control to the breakaway regions in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In the purest form of this scenario, the Kremlin ceases its military and economic support for the separatists (the Luhansk and Donetsk Peoples’ Republics) in exchange for de facto recognition of Crimea as a part of Russia, signified by the West lifting the sanctions it has imposed.

“War as an instrument of Crimea’s integration and bargaining with the West”: the Kremlin’s calculation of risks leads it to preclude the possibility of robust action from the West in response to escalating hostilities in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin considers the West at present too weak and divided amongst itself (within both the US and the EU) and Ukraine’s armed forces weak, and thus launches the construction of a land bridge between Russia and Crimea, achieved through a military offensive in Mariupol and the occupation of parts of the Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts by including them in the belt of unrecognized quasi-governments in eastern Ukraine. Afterwards, a new status quo emerges, and Russia carries out negotiations from the West from a position of strength, i.e., controlling a significant portion of Ukraine’s territory and integrating Crimea into the RF.

“Crimean stalemate”: In this situation, the “Crimean issue” drifts towards a situation of “self-preservation” as a geopolitical issue. Ukraine, Russia, and the West uphold the current status quo in Crimea: on the one hand, none of these players recognizes the annexation of Crimea, and on the other, none of them attempts any active steps to return Crimea to Ukraine. It states verbally that Crimea is an integral part of Ukraine; however, no one risks altering the existing balance in relations. Crimea remains a kind of alienated subject in Russia’s federal structure, because the RF does not have the logistical and economic resources for its complete integration. This scenario suggests the continuation and expansion of sanctions regimes, freezing any kind of strategic contacts Russia has

made in the collective West (i.e., the US, NATO, the EU, G7 countries). Conservative administration of the “Crimean issue” will continue until the context for the Russia vs. the West conflict qualitatively changes from a conservative into a reactive stance through changing the status quo in other geopolitical arenas (Central Asia, Iran, Siberia, the Far East, Belarus after Lukashenko).

Among the three scenarios proposed, the third is, in my view, most likely, inasmuch as it preserves the balance of powers; meanwhile, the Ukrainian economy and military capabilities suffer from structural weakness, and the US and the EU lack the political will necessary to expand the existing arsenal of levers against Russia and to cross over into a phase of more active international conflict amid the escalation of problems in other regions of the world.