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Crimea's Three-Tiered Crisis of Identity

Jane I. Dawson

Executive Summary

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Crimean peninsula has been engulfed in what sometimes seems to be a never-ending cycle of crises. Political instability, repeated political confrontations with its parent state Ukraine, and signs of rising ethnic tensions, have led some to view Crimea as a potential powderkeg. Added to these internal tensions, Crimea has found itself at the center of a dangerous war of words between Russia and Ukraine as these two immense neighbors struggle to redefine their relationship. Given the multiple political, ethnic, and geopolitical tensions that have entangled the region, it may seem odd that the Crimea has not experienced the outbreak of violent conflict observed in other parts of the former USSR. In this paper, however, I argue that the absence of violent conflict is both predictable and understandable if one considers the interactions between Crimea's three levels of crises: ideological, ethnic, and geopolitical.

The paper is divided into three sections. In Part I, I consider Crimea's unusual history and the ideological, ethnic, and geopolitical cleavages this distinctive historical path created in Crimean society. In Part II, I consider how Crimean politicians in the post-Soviet era have attempted to mobilize support based on these historical cleavages. Crimea's politicians have attempted to mobilize social constituencies along ideological cleavages (neo-communist, social welfare platforms versus market-oriented capitalist policies), ethnic divisions (Russian versus Ukrainian versus Crimean Tatar), and geopolitical lines (pro-Russia, pro-Ukraine, and pro-independence). In Part III, I argue that while certain politicians hoped to mobilize society along a single deep and dominant cleavage -- in particular, ethnic Russians with aspirations for reunification with Russia versus ethnic Ukrainians committed to Ukrainian affiliation -- such a cleavage in fact barely exists in Crimean society today. In fact, this analysis shows that (1) commitments to ideological platforms are generally weak and malleable amongst most major constituencies; (2) ethnic divisions between Russians and Ukrainians are almost non-existent, with the exception of the 3.8% Ukrainian-language speakers on the peninsula; and (3) aspirations for independence or reunification with Russia are based almost entirely on economic considerations and, with the exception of the Sevastopol military population, do not reflect strong popular commitment. In addition, it should be noted that Russia's involvement in Chechnya has drastically curtailed Russian political interest in overt intervention in Crimea.
Thus, fears that ethnic and geopolitical mobilization might soon tear Crimean society apart are grossly overestimated.

Thus, this analysis gives rise to cautious optimism as to the future of the Crimean peninsula. The ethnic conflagration between Crimea's two dominant groups, Russians and Ukrainians, and the possibility of violent confrontation between Russia and Ukraine over the peninsula's geopolitical status, predicted by many, appear unlikely at this point in time.

This said, however, it must be noted that several serious points of tension do exist on the peninsula which need to be addressed. First, while ethnic tensions between Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea appear to be minimal, ethnic relations between the dominant Slavs and minority Crimean Tatar population are not as harmonious. While Crimean Tatars make up only about 12% of Crimea's population, their separatist platform accompanied by slavic prejudices against them have led to escalating tensions between the Crimean Tatars and the slavic population, and the potential for violence is substantial. Second, while the region is comparatively peaceful now, it is unclear how long it can continue on this path given the near complete failure of the government to address the economic and social problems that have proliferated since the collapse of the USSR. And finally, while the severe constitutional conflict which has dominated Crimea's relationship with its parent state Ukraine for several years currently appears to be easing, numerous points of conflict between Crimea and Ukraine continue to exist.

These three points of tension in Crimea have the potential to destabilize the region and should be addressed by the international community. In particular, western governments and international organizations should consider: (1) increased attention to the situation of the Crimean Tatars on the peninsula, increased aid to assist in the rebuilding of Tatar communities, and support for continued efforts to ensure adequate Crimean Tatar representation in Crimea's political institutions; (2) increased economic expert assistance to the region (as distinct from assistance to Ukraine as a whole) and possibly increased economic aid; and (3) increased diplomatic support for the peaceful negotiation of a more stable and mutually acceptable relationship between Crimea and Ukraine.
CRIMEA'S THREE-TIERED CRISIS OF IDENTITY

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Introduction

Over the past several years, the Crimean peninsula has been engulfed in what sometimes seems to be a never-ending cycle of crises. Since 1991, the Crimea has survived a serious confrontation between its president and parliament (fall 1994), multiple eruptions of a severe constitutional conflict with its parent state Ukraine (1991-96), and dire warnings of an impending explosion of interethnic hostilities. Signs of political instability and the government's inability to move beyond crisis to the effective resolution of Crimea's growing economic and social problems abound. Added to these internal dangers, the Crimea has found itself at the center of a high stakes game between Russia and Ukraine, as these two immense neighbors struggle to redefine their relationship in the post-Soviet era. The Black Sea Fleet, its bases in Sevastopol and elsewhere in Crimea, and even the peninsula itself, have come to be seen as symbols of power and influence as Russia and Ukraine struggle to establish their new relationship in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR. In light of the political, ethnic, and geopolitical tensions that have enveloped the region over the past several years, it sometimes seems amazing that the Crimea has not erupted in violent conflict like so many other contested ethnic enclaves of the former USSR, including Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, or more recently, Chechnya. It is thus worth considering why the Crimea has been able to avoid the bloodshed that has racked so many regions of the former USSR, and whether the peninsula is likely to continue on its peaceful path in the days ahead.

The multiple crises that have engulfed the Crimea in recent years may best be understood in terms of the Crimea's complex and multilayered crisis of identity. Since the final days of perestroika, the Crimean population has come face-to-face with the question, what does it mean to be "Crimean?" As elsewhere in the former USSR, the Crimean population has been forced to address the identity question on multiple levels: political, ideological, and geopolitical. Politically, they must determine how their new political community is to be defined, whether in civic or ethnic terms. Ideologically, attitudes toward the institutions and practices of the Soviet era must be reassessed and possibly adapted to incorporate new ideas of democracy and capitalism. And geopolitically, the Crimean population must come to grips with its position relative to its larger and more powerful neighbors, Russia and Ukraine, as well as
to the world at large. Such a three-tiered search for identity might lead any society toward a state of crisis. For the Crimean population, however, this search for a meaningful and acceptable post-Soviet identity has been greatly complicated by the region’s complex history and circumstances.

In this paper, I will consider how Crimea’s three-tiered search for a viable post-Soviet identity has influenced political processes in the region. After reviewing the historical background of Crimea’s identity crisis, I will turn to the question of how each of these three identity issues has been used in Crimean politics since the breakup of the USSR in 1991. Finally, I will address the critical question of how these three levels interact with each other. What cleavages do each of these crises of identity create in society and amongst political elites, and how do these cleavages reinforce or balance each other? Certainly, the mutual reinforcement of identity cleavages across multiple levels would lead to serious worries about the possibility for violent confrontation in the region. In this paper, however, I will argue that despite the machinations of certain politicians in Simferopol, Moscow, and Kiev, these identity cleavages have yet to move in a mutually reinforcing direction. My findings thus give rise to cautious optimism as to the prospects for the peaceful resolution of Crimea’s multiple crises.

I. Historical Background: Ethnicity, Ideology, and Geopolitics in Crimea

While the populations of all of the newly independent states of the former USSR have been forced to confront difficult issues of identity, the challenge to the Crimean population has been particularly acute. When the USSR disbanded in 1991, the Crimeans found themselves adrift. The Crimea’s confused ethnic history left the population with little consensus on which ethnic group, if any, had the most legitimate claim to the peninsula. It’s variegated geopolitical history left them uncertain as to how the peninsula should relate to its immense neighbors, Ukraine and Russia, and to the world at large. And its well known status as the playground for the communist nomenklatura and preferred retirement site for political and military elites provided a population perhaps less eager to jump on the bandwagon of capitalism and democracy than elsewhere. Thus, in order to understand Crimea’s search for a new post-Soviet identity, it is necessary to first come to grips with the region’s unique ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological history.

Crimea’s Twisted Ethnic History

One of the most difficult tasks confronting post-Soviet populations is the definition of a new political community. No longer do the boundaries of the USSR define the outer limits of the political community. No longer do people simply assume that membership in the political
community is open to all residents, regardless of ethnicity. Now new territorial boundaries must be established and accepted and a consensus must be reached on who should be considered members of the new post-Soviet state. Is membership in the political community to be based on civic principles, open to all who reside within given territorial boundaries? Or is to be restricted, based on ethnicity or other ascriptive characteristics? Most simply put, is the political community to be inclusively or exclusively defined? The question of membership in the political community has been sharply contested in all of the post-Soviet states. In some, however, populations are moving toward consensus, while in others the question remains at the very center of political discourse.

In the case of Crimea, the population has found it particularly difficult to come to grips with the nature of the political community due to the region’s convoluted ethnic history. As of 1993, the region was composed of 57.3% ethnic Russians, 25.8% Ukrainians, and 11.7% Crimean Tatars. These figures, however, do not accurately capture the complexity of the Crimean situation. In order to begin to understand Crimea’s ethnic situation, one needs to consider the dramatic fluctuations in ethnic composition which have occurred over the past two hundred years and how each of the competing groups views its history and roots in the region.

In Crimea, possibilities for delineating the new political community abound. On the one hand, the National Movement of Crimean Tatars (NDKT) has called for the creation of a "Crimean Tatar state," which provides enhanced political rights to ethnic Crimean Tatars. In a similar vein, the Russian Party of Crimea has advocated the revival of an ethnic Russian national identity and a privileged political position for Russians in Crimea. Meanwhile leading members of the Ukrainian national organization, Rukh, have called for the “Ukrainianization” of the peninsula. Other political figures have favored a Slavic identity for the region, uniting Russians and Ukrainians but marginalizing the Crimean Tatars. And still others have advocated a civic, "Crimean," basis for the peninsula’s political community. Each of these competing forces tends to look to history to legitimate its platform.

For the Crimean Tatars, the relevant history begins over seven centuries ago when the Crimean Tatar ethnic group first began to coalesce. The Crimean Tatars are thought to have emerged out of intermarriage between aristocrats of the Golden Horde (which swept through the peninsula in the 1220s) and the Islamic and Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes which inhabited the northern steppe region of Crimea. While four subgroups were discernable within this

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1 Demograficheski spravochnik (Kiev: Ministry of Statistics, 1993).
emerging ethnic group, the Crimean Tatars contend that their sense of ethnic identity and
community first began to emerge during this early period in the thirteenth century. This sense
of identity was further reinforced by the formation of a Crimean Tatar state under Khan Haci
Giray, 1443-1466. His dynasty continued to rule the peninsula until 1783.

While the Crimean Tatar state was only independent until 1475, Tatar historians tend to
downplay this fact. Although the Ottoman Turks were the official protectors of this state after
1475, the Crimean Tatars claim that their intervention in the region was minimal and the
Crimean Tatar state possessed substantial autonomy. Thus, the Crimean Tatars not only look
back to history to substantiate their claims to being an "indigenous" population which should
have special rights in the region, but also to support their calls for the creation of an ethnically
based Crimean Tatar state. For the Crimean Tatars, theirs was a long and glorious history
which was rudely and unjustly interrupted by the incursion of the Russian Empire in 1783.

While the Crimean Tatars formed the bulk of the population prior to the Russian
conquest of 1783, the ethnic composition of the peninsula shifted dramatically after this time.
During the years immediately following the Russian invasion (1783-1791), approximately 20%
of Crimea’s half-million Tatars emigrated from the region. During the 1800s, Crimean Tatar
migration from Crimea continued steadily, with most Tatars settling in Turkey. Meanwhile, a
vast influx of Russians further diminished the Crimean Tatar presence and by 1897, the Tatars
accounted for only 34% of the peninsula’s population.

Despite their declining population, the Crimean Tatars continued to strive for a
reconstitution of the Crimean Tatar state. In 1917, the Tatars established a national assembly
of the Crimean Tatar people (known as the kurultai) which aspired to govern the peninsula. It
was challenged, however, by the competing Crimean Provincial Assembly and quickly
overthrown in early 1918 by the Crimean soviet established by the Bolsheviks. A Crimean
Tatar puppet government was also established during a brief period of German occupation in
1918, but it was short-lived. The experiences of 1917-18, however, have come to represent
important components in the Crimean Tatar interpretation of history. These brief revivals of
the Crimean Tatar state have played an important role in mobilizing later generations to
struggle for the reconstitution of an independent Crimean Tatar state. By the early 1920s,
however, Crimean Tatar population had fallen even further, reaching a mere 26% in 1921.

During the Second World War, the final blow came when the Crimean Tatars were
accused of collaboration with the Nazis and deported en masse to Central Asia (primarily

3See for example: V. E. Vozgrin, "Imperiya i Krym — Dolgii put’ k genotsidu" (Empire and the Crimea:
the Long Path to Genocide), (Bakhchisarai, Crimea, 1994).
Uzbekistan). The Crimean Tatars have long contended that the accusations of collaboration were unfounded and that the deportation represents the ultimate injustice against the Crimean Tatar people. Despite the fact that the Crimean Tatar population had long ceased to constitute the dominant ethnic group of the region, the deportation is often portrayed as the key injustice perpetrated against the Crimean Tatar people and used to legitimate demands for the reconstitution of the Crimean Tatar state (defunct since 1783). The Crimean Tatars began their campaign to return to the Crimea and establish a Crimean Tatar region during the relatively open Khrushchev period. Following the repressive Brezhnev years, this campaign once again blossomed in the late 1980s under Gorbachev. In 1989, the Crimean Tatars began to return to the peninsula and by 1993 they accounted for over 11% of the Crimea’s population. Since that time, the Crimean Tatar presence has levelled off.

The Crimean Tatars’ ability to trace their roots to the peninsula back over seven centuries has led them to declare themselves the indigenous population of the region, with special attachment, rights, and privileges to the land. Their history of autonomous statehood, both prior to the Russian conquest and during the Bolshevik revolution, is used to further reinforce their demands for a definition of the political community which favors the Crimean Tatar population and ensures their ability to affect decisions in the region, despite their low population percentage.

For the Russian population, however, this is all ancient and largely irrelevant history. According to Russian historians, with the Russian conquest of the peninsula under the armies of Catherine II in 1783 came the introduction of civilization to the region. According to the Russian version of history (and Soviet as well), prior to the Russian conquest, the peninsula was inhabited by a nomadic and uncivilized population. The Crimean Tatar population is viewed as a barbarian, fragmented, tribal society and their claims to a tradition of independent statehood are rejected by Russian historians who stress the dominance of the Turks in the region prior to the entrance of Russia in 1783.

Following Catherine II’s incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Empire, ethnic Russians slowly began to trickle into the region. After 1876, when the Crimea became accessible by railway, Russian immigration to the region picked up substantially. While Crimean Tatars still made up a majority of the population in 1860, by the late 1800s, their numbers were dwarfed by the immense influx of Russians. This inflow of Russians continued through much of the Soviet period.

Russian organizations advocating a pro-Russian or pro-Slavic definition of the peninsula’s new political community are quick to reject Crimean Tatar claims to being an indigenous people. Instead, these groups will claim that it is the Russians who are the indigenous people.
According to their interpretation of history, it was the Russians that settled the region. While accepting that certain nomadic and barbarian tribes may have preceded the Russians, there is little acceptance of Tatar claims to special ties to the land and a sophisticated history of autonomous statehood.

Finally, ethnic Ukrainians have also occasionally laid claim to the Crimean peninsula. Even organizations supporting a stronger Ukrainian presence in the region, however, usually acknowledge that their ethnic roots to the region may not be as strong or deep as those of their competitors. Thus, arguments favoring pro-Ukrainian ethnic exclusivity are comparatively rare in contemporary political discourse.

Like the Russians, ethnic Ukrainians began to settle in Crimea after the peninsula's incorporation into the Russian Empire. Although Ukrainian migration into Crimea was not as substantial as Russian, ethnic Ukrainians nonetheless made up approximately one quarter of Crimea's population by the end of the Soviet period. According to the pro-Ukrainian interpretation of history, however, the most important factor to consider during both the tsarist and Soviet periods is the close relationship between the populations of Ukraine and Crimea. Historical accounts tend to stress the constant assistance provided by the Ukrainian people to the peninsula. While Ukrainian historians cannot point to a time in which Ukrainians made up the majority of the Crimean population and have made no attempt to claim that Ukrainians represent an indigenous people in the region, they nonetheless have attempted to argue that Ukrainians hold greater attachment to the land than Russians.

With their competing versions of history in hand, political elites have engaged in an intense struggle to determine the nature of Crimea's emerging political community. The question of how political power should be distributed among competing ethnic groups has been a central issue in Crimean politics since 1991, and represents an important dividing line between parties and political organizations. Opportunities to mobilize constituencies along ethnic lines have been substantial and politicians have not been shy about capitalizing on these possibilities. Nonetheless, the past five years have revealed significant limitations in the potential for ethnic mobilization in Crimea. In Part II of this essay, I will consider more specifically how various political actors and organizations have attempted to mobilize ethnic constituencies and the limitations in these strategies that have been revealed during the post-Soviet period.


In addition to the uncertainty surrounding the question of the proper balance of power and influence among competing ethnic groups, the Crimean peninsula has also faced a
bewildering array of options with regard to its future position in the post-Soviet world. Looking back at its history, there are certainly grounds to support a number of possible outcomes, including independence or affiliation with Russia, Ukraine, or even, Turkey. While the last of these options has not yet entered Crimean political debate, the others represent a critical point of contention among post-Soviet parties and political organizations in Crimea. Interestingly enough, rather than simply pointing to a particular period in history to support competing geopolitical platforms, proponents of each of these views rely heavily on international law to legitimate their claims and demands.

Before turning to the question of how Crimea's geopolitical status accords with international law, a brief review of the historical record is in order. As mentioned above, Crimea's first entrance on the political stage came in 1443 with the establishment of a Crimean Tatar state under Khan Haci Giray. After a brief period of independence, the peninsula was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire and continued under Turkish protection (1475-1783) until the Russian conquest. There followed more than a century of Russian rule, finally leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. During 1917-18, both a Crimean Tatar assembly and Crimean provincial assembly attempted to establish independent rule in the region. Both were quickly pushed aside, however, by the Crimean soviet set up by the Bolsheviks in December 1917. After a hiatus of both German and White army occupation, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established by the Bolsheviks and designated as a component of the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics in 1921.

During the Second World War, amidst claims of Crimean Tatar collaboration with the Germans, the Crimea lost its status as an autonomous republic (June 1945) and was demoted to a mere "oblast" of the Russian Federation. Following almost two centuries of affiliation with tsarist and Soviet Russia, however, Crimea's status was once again changed in 1954. At this time, the Crimea was officially transferred from Russian to Ukrainian jurisdiction as a symbol of 300 years of friendship between Russia and Ukraine. There it remained an oblast until 1991 when its status as an autonomous soviet socialist republic was restored, though explicitly as a component of Ukraine. Thus, when the USSR collapsed in the fall of 1991, Crimea found itself tied to an independent Ukraine. Due to both historical and ethnic factors, however, significant portions of the population found this outcome less than satisfactory.

The issue of Crimea's transfer from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 has formed the focus of much of the political debate on Crimea's appropriate position in the post-Soviet world. It is important to note, however, that this debate has expanded far beyond the confines of the peninsula itself, with key political figures in both Russia and Ukraine playing critical roles in shaping outcomes on this issue. Politicians in Simferopol, Moscow, and Kiev have also not
been unaware of the potential role of the international community in determining the outcome on this issue, and thus much of the discourse on the question has been shaped by consideration of international mores and opinions. The question of whether or not the 1954 transfer was in accordance with international law has thus become a central issue in the debate over Crimea’s proper position in the post-Soviet world.

Much of the discussion over Russia’s rightful ownership of the peninsula has taken place in Moscow rather than Simferopol. On Jan. 23, 1992, the Russian parliament called for a reexamination of the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine, citing its questionable legality. In May of that year, they went even further, declaring the 1954 transfer null and void and calling for Russian-Ukrainian negotiations to resolve the issue. For Russian nationalists in both Moscow and Simferopol, the 1954 transfer exceeded Khrushchev’s authority and thus has no legal standing. While the Russian parliament and pro-Russia factions in Crimea have consistently questioned the legality of the transfer, however, both President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin have explicitly rejected Russian claims to the peninsula.  Meshkov and members of the pro-Russia faction in the Crimean parliament have also used international law to support their protests against specific actions meant to keep control over Crimea by the Ukrainian government which have occurred since 1991.

Those favoring continued affiliation between Crimea and Ukraine, however, have also used legal arguments to support their claims. In a manuscript widely circulated in Crimea in 1995, Ukrainian emigre Stefan Terlezki argues that “Ukraine has an irreproachable legally-grounded position” and that the 1954 transfer was in complete accordance with international law and the USSR Constitution of 1936 (citing articles 14, 49, and 31 to support his claims). Similarly, legal specialist P. Yegrafov, has argued forcefully for the legality of the 1954 transfer and of Ukraine’s actions to keep the peninsula under its control since 1991.

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4 During Yuri Meshkov’s February 1994 visit to Moscow, Yeltsin refused to meet with him and Chernomyrdin explicitly rejected any Russian claim to the region. Reported in Ukrainian Weekly, March 27, 1994.


Crimea’s History of Ideological Conservatism

Finally, the Crimea’s long history of ideological conservatism set the stage for post-1991 debates on political and economic reform on the peninsula. Because of Crimea’s status as the playground for the communist nomenklatura, its popularity as a retirement site for high-level military and government officials, and the substantial military presence on the peninsula, the Crimea was often viewed as a Communist Party stronghold. Even after perestroika had begun to sweep through much of the former USSR, the powerful party elite in Crimea were able to maintain tight control over political processes in the region. Popular democratic mobilization in Crimea prior to 1991 was quite weak and communist ideals appeared to be well-ingrained in the population.

With the failed August, 1991 putsch in Moscow, the Crimean Communist Party finally lost its privileged position in Crimea. Nonetheless, continued low levels of mobilization on democratic and market platforms indicates perhaps less affinity for the reform process than has been observed in many other areas of the former USSR. The almost complete absence of economic reform in the Crimea to date attests to the strong conservative legacy in the region. This legacy would certainly be expected to play an important role in the post-1991 political competition that emerged.

II. Political Competition in Crimea, Post-1991

While the ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological history of the Crimea provided the fodder for the political competition that ensued after the breakup of the USSR in 1991, the ways in which emerging political elites utilized these issues and the extent to which they were able to mobilize important constituencies to support their agenda was neither as simple nor as straightforward as might be expected. While logically one might predict that the political arena might split along simple lines, with Russians supporting a pro-Russia, pro-Russian orientation, Ukrainians advocating the parallel Ukrainian platform, and Crimean Tatars perhaps favoring a pro-Tatar, pro-independence agenda, this has not been the case. In fact, the cleavages which have divided political elites and society along ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological lines have been tangled and rarely mutually reinforcing. Despite the attempts of some politicians in Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine to move these cleavages into alignment, a deep and irreparable fissure in Crimean society has yet to emerge. In this section, I will consider how political elites have utilized each of these identity issues to mobilize key constituencies within Crimean society since 1991, then return to the question of how the three tiers have interacted with each other.
The Political Spectrum in Crimea

Since 1991, political parties have proliferated across the Crimean peninsula. Representing a myriad of ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological orientations, their relative appeal to constituencies within the Crimean population has fluctuated dramatically over the past five years. While the parties differ in their geopolitical and ideological platforms, however, the primary dividing line between parties has been ethnic; parties may be easily distinguished by their claims to represent Russians, Ukrainians, or Crimean Tatars. Parties claiming to represent the interests of all Crimeans are less common but nonetheless also exist.

The pro-Russian orientation constitutes the largest group of parties in Crimea. Numerous parties claiming to represent the Russian community currently exist and their number is constantly growing due to increasing fragmentation of this movement. The platforms tend to be vague, overlapping, and constantly in flux. On the ethnic question, most of these parties favor enhanced political influence for ethnic Russians and oppose any kind of minority quota electoral system that might threaten the Russians’ dominant influence in Crimean politics. Their geopolitical orientation is often particularly vague, reflecting an awareness of the sensitivity of this issue. While most parties informally favor reunification with Russia, there is a tendency to hide these demands behind vague calls for Crimean independence or the formation of a Slavic Federation. On the ideological front, these parties cover the entire spectrum from pro to anti-communist. For the diversity within the pro-Russian movement, we need to take a closer look at the key players.

The most visible pro-Russian grouping has been the Republican Movement of Crimea (known by its Russian acronym as RDK) and its party offspring, the Republican Party of Crimea (RPK).8 The RDK was established on August 24, 1991 — not coincidentally, the day after Ukraine declared its independence from the USSR. Initially founded by Yuri Meshkov with the support of the Crimean Republican Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, its initial goal was to protect Crimea from the threat of Ukrainianization which was expected to follow Ukraine’s declaration of independence. The movement initially supported the goal of state independence for Crimea which would remove the peninsula from Kiev’s tutelage and permit Crimea to join in some kind of equal union with other republics of the former USSR (particularly, Russia). In October of 1992 at the RDK’s third conference, the decision was made to create a smaller, more elite political party which would recruit its members from

within the RDK ranks. Movement leader Yuri Meshkov was immediately selected as the chairman of the new RPK party.

Neither the party leader, Meshkov, nor other spokesmen have presented a coherent and consistent statement of party platforms on key ethnic and geopolitical issues. On ethnic questions, the party and movement have both claimed an open, inclusive orientation. Rather than publicly advocating privileges for ethnic Russians, the party and movement have focused on the protection of the status of the Russian language (an issue of importance to both Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea) and protection of the Slavic community in the face of the returning Tatars' demands for land restitution and enhanced political rights. While an undercurrent of ethnic Russian nationalism certainly is discernable in the party and movement, its leaders have been careful not to push this issue too far. Likewise, the party/movement's geopolitical platform has been tempered by an awareness of the dangers of these issues. While Meshkov and other members of the party have been heard to call for reunification of Crimea with Russia, the official party platform and most consistent demand has been for Crimean independence within a union of independent post-Soviet states. Only on ideological issues has the party been frank and forthcoming; their hostility to the Communist Party and system has been a consistent feature of the movement. The movement/party platforms openly favor a rapid transition to a capitalist market system with only minimal social guarantees to the population.

The progressive splintering of the RDK movement has provided a rich source of new pro-Russian parties in Crimea. In 1993, another leading RDK member, Viktor Mezhak, split off from the RDK, taking with him many of the members of the Veterans of Afghanistan who had been active in the formation of the movement. The new party, the People's Party of Crimea, differed little in platform from the RDK/RPK and most observers attribute its formation to personal differences between Mezhak and Meshkov, rather than to serious ideological divisions. The platforms of the RDK and People's Party were enough in harmony to allow the parties to form an electoral bloc (the Russia Bloc) during the 1994 presidential elections. The bloc, however, collapsed immediately after the elections in May of 1994.

Moving in a more openly chauvinistic direction is yet another splinter party from the RDK, the Russian Party of Crimea. Its leader Sergei Shuvainikov broke away from the RDK in 1993 claiming that the party did not adequately incorporate an ethnic dimension. Shuvainikov openly boasts the cultural superiority of the Russian population and advocates

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9 This was particularly clear in an interview with former deputy chairman of the RDK, Vadim Mordashov, Aug. 1, 1994, Simferopol.
policies aimed at increasing their influence in the region. He is hostile to the idea of creating a civic sense of "Crimean" identity, which he views as artificial, and would like to see more opportunities to build a strong sense of Russian identity amongst ethnic Russians in the region. Rather than favoring Crimean independence for Crimea, Shuvainikov's party openly supports reunification with Russia or at worst, Crimea's incorporation into a Slavic Federation. While the party views the Communist Party as guilty of corruption and crimes of the past, their platform nonetheless is heavily skewed toward the maintenance of social guarantees and wary of the impact of capitalism on society. Shuvainikov favors a very slow transition toward a market economy, guided by a strong -- perhaps even authoritarian -- government.

Even more radically oriented in a pro-Russian, pro-Russia direction is the National Salvation Front based in the Black Sea port city of Sevastopol. Having little interest in ideological issues, this group led by Aleksandr Kruglov is adamantly dedicated to maintaining Russian control over the city of Sevastopol and pushing for reunification of the entire peninsula with Russia. Unlike the leaders of the RDK/RPK and the People's Party of Crimea, Kruglov has displayed little caution in dealing with sensitive ethnic and geopolitical issues and his statements have been highly incendiary.

While the above organizations represent the key players amongst the pro-Russian faction over the past five years, it should also be noted that dozens of smaller groups such as the Russian Society and the All-Crimea Voters' Movement have also played a significant role in attempting to mobilize Crimea's Russian population.

In contrast to the well established movements and parties supporting a pro-Russian orientation, the groups representing Ukrainians have displayed a much weaker presence in Crimea. The Rukh movement formed as an all-Ukraine umbrella for democratic organizations during the perestroika period is almost impossible to find on the Crimean peninsula. While Rukh still represents a powerful movement in Ukraine, it has not been visible in Crimea since 1991. The chapter in the Crimean capital city of Simferopol has long been disbanded and leading Rukh members in Kiev openly admit that Rukh no longer has any organized presence on the peninsula.

Rukh's platform strongly favors reining in Crimean autonomy and pursuing an active policy of Ukrainianization in the region. Visits by Rukh leaders to Crimea have often led to anti-Ukrainian demonstrations. Similarly, the numerous democratic parties

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that now exist throughout Ukraine no longer have chapters in Crimea.\footnote{Interviews with former chair of the Simferopol chapter of the Democratic Party of Ukraine, Vitali Fesenko, July 1994 & 1995, Simferopol.} While such chapters were formed in 1990-91, most dissolved quickly after Ukraine’s declaration of independence.

The most active pro-Ukrainian organization in Crimea is the Ukrainian Civic Congress of Crimea formed in early 1994. The goal of this movement was to create an umbrella for all pro-Ukrainian forces and to strengthen their impact on the 1994 presidential elections in Crimea.\footnote{Interview with chair of the Ukrainian Civic Congress of Crimea, Sergei Litvin, Aug. 4, 1994, Simferopol.} A leadership struggle within the movement, however, led to its fragmentation in 1995 with Vladislav Yermakov maintaining leadership of the original group and Yuri Kolesnikov branching off to form his own All-Crimea Congress of Ukrainians. Given the overall weakness of the Ukrainian population in Crimea along with strong popular fears of impending Ukrainianization, these two congresses have both tended to pursue a cautious strategy. Their ethnic platform favors only an enhancement of the status of Ukrainian culture and language, rather than overt political demands, while their geopolitical platform supports continued affiliation with Ukraine.\footnote{Platforms discussed by representatives of both congresses at a roundtable on national representation sponsored by Freedom House, July 21, 1995, Simferopol. Speakers included: Vladislav Yermakov and Yuri Kolesnikov.}

Finally, the Crimean Tatar population is represented by two longstanding organizations: the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement (OKND) and the National Movement of Crimean Tatars (NDKT). Both groups date back several decades and their differences in orientation and strategies are longstanding. The OKND, led by long time dissident Mustafad Dzemilov, has consistently favored a strategy of confrontation, refusing to compromise with either Soviet authorities or the successive post-Soviet regimes in Crimea.\footnote{Interviews with Mustafad Dzemilov, April 1991 and July 1994, Simferopol and Nadir Bekirov, head of the department of law and politics of the Mejlis, July 1995, Simferopol. Human rights activist and member of the Ukrainian National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, Natalya Berlitser, was also extremely helpful in providing information on the Crimean Tatars.} In contrast, the NDKT, led by Yuri Osmanov up until his assassination in 1993 and more recently by Vasvi Abduraimov, has tended to pursue a policy of compromise. NDKT leaders favor working within the law to try to improve the situation of the Crimean Tatars. Given this long history of dissent versus accommodation, the two organizations and their leaders are now openly hostile to each other.

Since the return of the Crimean Tatars to the peninsula, the OKND has been by far the more visible and politically influential of the two groups. In June 1991, Crimean Tatars held a
general congress in Crimea bringing together over 200 delegates from across Crimea and the USSR. Known as the Second Kurultai (the first being held in 1917), Tatar delegates elected a governing body for all Crimean Tatars known as the Mejlis. While members of the OKND and non-affiliated Crimean Tatars participated in the Kurultai, the NDKT refused to participate arguing that they would prefer to work within the system rather than without. Thus, the 30-odd member governing Mejlis does not include any members of the NDKT. At the 1991 Kurultai, OKND chair Dzemilov was elected chairman of the Mejlis and thus effective leader of the Crimean Tatar people. In reality, the platforms of the Mejlis and the OKND are practically interchangeable.

The ethnic orientation of the NDKT and OKND vary substantially. While the NDKT favors a civic platform which will permit the Crimean Tatars to be integrated into Crimean society, the OKND strongly favors an ethnic orientation. Dzemilov and other leaders of the OKND and Mejlis have firmly rejected Tatar integration and argue adamantly for the creation of a "Crimean Tatar state" which will place top priority on the interests of ethnic Tatars. Their goal is to improve the living conditions of ethnic Tatars returning to the peninsula and substantially enhance their political influence in the region. Dzemilov and others argue that the Tatars are an indigenous people in the region and as such should be given the right of self-determination. How this right can be reconciled with the rights of the majority non-Tatar population in the region, however, is an issue that Dzemilov and others have had difficulty addressing.

In addition to demanding special political rights for the Crimean Tatar population, the OKND and Mejlis stress cultural separatism for their population. A great deal of their work is devoted to rebuilding a separate sense of Crimean Tatar identity, reviving their language, educational institutions, religion, and culture. The goal is the creation of a separate community and integration is firmly rejected.

The geopolitical platforms of the two movements also differ. While the NDKT has not been explicit about its geopolitical orientation, it has frequently been accused of favoring closer ties to Russia. In contrast, the OKND openly supports continued affiliation with Ukraine on the grounds that Ukraine is the only country which is likely to help with the resettlement of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula. The OKND opposes stronger ties to Russia arguing that Russia has never shown any interest in helping the Crimean Tatar population. Their opposition to reunification with Russia is further reinforced by the anti-Crimean Tatar orientation that is

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so common in the pro-Russian parties. Similarly, the OKND rejects the idea of independence, recognizing that it is just a facade for greater Russian dominance in the region and would likewise imply less financial support for resettlement. Finally, while OKND leaders may occasionally refer to the need for closer ties to Turkey, where many Crimean Tatars have settled, they also recognize that a platform favoring unification with Turkey is currently out of the question.

As with the Ukrainian groups, ideological issues are not at the center of Crimean Tatar political discourse. Ethnic and geopolitical issues are viewed as far more important and the ideological orientation of the NDKT and OKND is not immediately apparent. The OKND has expressed a wariness of the effect of a rapid transition to capitalism (fearing increased difficulties in land restitution and resettlement for returning Crimean Tatars). Likewise, the OKND leaders have repeatedly stressed that the creation of a Crimean Tatar state takes top priority on the political front; while democracy within the Crimean Tatar population is the goal, a broader democracy across Crimean society is not a priority.

Finally, it should be noted that not all parties in Crimea are based on ethnic identities. In fact, several influential parties claiming to represent the interests of all Crimeans have played an important role in Crimean politics over the past five years. One of the most prominent of these parties is the Union of Communists of Crimea, formed in June 1992 and headed by Leonid Grach. The communists have consistently attempted to put themselves above nationalist politics, explicitly rejecting the pro-Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar orientations of their main competitors. Their ethnic platform was nicely reflected in one of their campaign slogans of 1995: "Here come the communists — there goes crime. Here come the communists — there goes nationalism."

The geopolitical position of the Crimean communists is apparently in flux. While supporting the Ukrainian communists call for continued Crimean affiliation with Ukraine, the Crimean communists nonetheless would like to see greater rights for Crimea within Ukraine. Leader Leonid Grach has been particularly vocal in calling for Ukraine's transition to a federal structure which would permit more regional autonomy. In keeping with prevailing trends within the Russian communist party, Grach also favors stronger ties between Russia and Ukraine which would permit stronger connections between Crimea and Russia. On the

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19 Interview with Leonid Grach, July 24, 1995, Simferopol. See also: Leonid Grach: Political Portrait (Simferopol: Tavrida, 1995).
ideological front, the Crimean communists obviously support greater social guarantees for the population and have cautioned against a rapid transition toward market capitalism.

Another influential civicly oriented party is the Party of Economic Renaissance of Crimea (PEVK) headed by Vladimir Sheviov. Sheviov has called for the creation of a unified "Crimean nation and people" and the elimination of the national factor in Crimean politics. His primary emphasis is on economic reform and he is strongly committed to marketization and democratization. Sheviov has explicitly modelled his party platform on that of the European social democratic parties and thus his focus has been consistently ideological rather than ethnic or geopolitical. As far as Crimea's relationship to its neighbors goes, Sheviov would like to see continued affiliation with Ukraine but with much stronger economic ties to both Ukraine and Russia and more economic autonomy for the peninsula.

Other less influential civicly oriented parties include the Union for the Support of the Republic of Crimea, headed by Yuri Komov, and the Union of Crimean Industrialists. Both focus on issues of economic reform and attempt to avoid divisive ethnic and geopolitical questions.

While this brief survey of the leading political organizations of Crimea provides insight into the spectrum of political activities on the peninsula, it leaves open the question of their relative influence. Which of these parties has had the greatest appeal to the population of Crimea and what role have they played in exacerbating ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological tensions in the region?

**Competition and Changing Party Influence**

Given this spectrum of political parties and organizations, it is important to consider the relative strength of their appeals to various constituencies in Crimean society. How potent was the ethnic card in mobilizing party support? What geopolitical platform resonated most strongly with the population? And how concerned were people with the economic and ideological agenda of these new parties? In sum, what was the mobilizational potential of these differing platforms on ethnicity, geopolitics, and ideology?

Prior to 1990, there was little sign that either ethnicity or geopolitics played an important role in mobilizing Crimea's population. At this time, popular mobilization was concentrated around such apolitical issues as environmentalism and anti-nuclear activism. Detailed studies of Crimea's environmental movement have shown no discernable ethnic split in the movement, with Crimea's dominant ethnic groups -- Russians and Ukrainians -- working side-by-side to

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21 Interview with Vladimir Sheviov, Aug. 2, 1994, Simferopol.
achieve their environmental objectives. Given the emergence of ethnically based movements throughout the USSR at that time, the Crimean Communist Party took the initiative to form a series of ethnically based clubs to allow people to explore their culture and identities. The party sponsored Russian Club, Ukrainian Club, etc., however, never got off the ground and elicited almost no popular response. Within the dominant ethnic groups, independent ethnically-based culture clubs were almost non-existent in Crimea prior to 1990. It should be noted, however, that the Crimean Tatars who began to flood back onto the peninsula in the late 1980s were not eager to integrate into this civically-based Crimean community; the powerful OKND organization consistently pursued a policy of ethnic exclusivity and Crimean Tatar participation in the budding social movements and alternative parties that emerged in the late 1980s was minimal.

Similarly, the issue of Crimea's geopolitical status received little attention prior to 1990. During the late 1980s, few Crimeans suspected the impending dissolution of the USSR and thus the issue of Crimea's relationship to Ukraine, Russia, and the world still seemed far off on the horizon. In keeping with general trends throughout the USSR, however, there was strong popular support for increased political and economic autonomy for the region. Given the potential profits of the tourism industry in Crimea, most of the alternative political groupings of the perestroika period included demands for greater local economic decision-making rights. The myriad of tiny political parties that began to emerge in 1990 thus tended to shy away from ethnic and geopolitical issues, and focused instead on bringing perestroika to the region politically and economically.

As the USSR moved closer to dismemberment, however, the platforms of the emerging political parties and organizations began to shift. As the independence movement began to grow in Ukraine, the Crimean population became ever more aware of the possibility that Crimea might soon become a component of an independent Ukraine. With Ukrainian nationalism apparently swelling throughout the Ukrainian mainland, the Crimeans began to fear an onslaught of Ukrainianization. This concern paved the way for geopolitical and ethnic issues to enter the mainstream of political discourse in Crimea.

There is substantial evidence to indicate that much of Crimea’s population feared incorporation within an independent Ukraine. In September of 1990, the Crimean oblast soviet took the bold step of requesting that the Crimea be returned its status as an "autonomous soviet socialist republic" — a status that was revoked during World War II amidst accusations of

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Crimean collaboration with the Nazis. This demand was put to an all-Crimea vote in January 1991 and passed overwhelmingly, with more than 93% of Crimea’s voters supporting the restoration of the “Crimean ASSR as a subject of the USSR and a party of the union treaty.” Their attempt to enhance Crimea’s political status and remove the peninsula from Ukraine’s jurisdiction was foiled, however, by the Ukrainian parliament’s amendment to this referendum. While the Ukrainian parliament voted to accept the referendum results, they modified the restoration of Crimea’s ASSR status to include the words “within Ukraine.”

With Ukraine’s declaration of independence on August 23, 1991, the political debate on Crimea’s status and ethnic identity began to heat up even more. Just one day later, Yuri Meshkov and other like-minded political activists formed the Republican Movement of Crimea to protect Russian interests and oppose Crimea’s attachment to an independent Ukraine. Likewise, the following month Crimea’s parliament voted to declare Crimea “sovereign,” though still within the republic of Ukraine.

While opponents to Ukrainian independence and Crimea’s continued affiliation with an independent Ukraine were clearly far more vocal about their concerns than supporters, the balance of popular sentiment on this issue has not been unambiguously established. In December 1991, Crimeans went to the polls along with the rest of Ukraine’s population to vote on the question of Ukrainian independence. Surprisingly enough, 55% of Crimea’s voters voted in favor of Ukrainian independence. Opponents of Ukrainian independence argue, however, that Crimea’s low voter turnout (67%) can be attributed to a boycott by those rejecting Crimea’s affiliation with Ukraine and thus the slim pro-independence majority does not indicate strong popular support for Ukrainian independence. The vote does nonetheless indicate that popular hostility to an independent Ukraine was far weaker in 1991 than the RDK had hoped and claimed.

As Ukrainian independence became reality, however, the question of Crimea’s relationship to its parent state became ever more pressing on the peninsula. During the spring of 1992, Crimean and Ukrainian authorities worked to hammer out a draft law on the delineation of power between the two entities. While the two governments appeared to be moving toward a mutually agreeable law, at the last minute the draft was radically amended by the Ukrainian parliament to curtail Crimea’s relative power. The Crimean parliament reacted angrily by declaring Crimean independence on May 5, 1992 and calling for a Crimean

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24For background on the formation of this movement, see Ukrainian Weekly, March 24, 1994, p. 18.
25An interesting analysis of the Crimean vote has been carried out by Valeri Khmelko of the Mohyla Institute, Kiev.
referendum to ratify this declaration. Simultaneously, the Crimean parliament issued a new constitution for the peninsula strongly oriented toward Crimean political and economic autonomy. The Crimean declaration of independence was immediately annulled by the Ukrainian parliament but represented the beginning of a standoff between Ukraine and Crimea that has yet to be definitively resolved.

Following several very tense weeks, the Crimean parliament agreed to withdraw its declaration of independence, cancel the referendum, and to undertake revisions in its constitution to bring it in line with Ukrainian law. The decision to move away from confrontation with Ukraine reflects not only the awareness of Crimean politicians of the dangers of confrontation, but also an understanding of the political winds on the peninsula. In fact, at this point in time, the RDK and other parties opposing affiliation with Ukraine were not in ascendancy in the Crimean parliament. Support for more centrist positions appeared to by growing and by 1993, Sheviov's centrist and explicitly civic party, the PEVK, represented the largest parliamentary bloc. The PEVK had little interest in confrontation with Ukraine and was far more concerned with issues of economic reform and growth. During 1993, the PEVK succeeded in promoting a plan to make Crimea a "free economic zone." While Ukrainian authorities ratified this decision, however, this program never got off the ground.

With the deterioration of both Ukraine and Crimea's economies during 1993, however, support for Sheviov's centrist approach began to wane in the population. With Ukraine lagging far behind Russia in its economic reform efforts and a strong sense that Russian standards of living were far superior to Ukrainian, popular sentiment in Crimea began to radicalize. The debate over whether Crimea belonged with Russia or Ukraine had finally emerged into the open and once initiated it became the hottest issue in Crimean politics. The initiation of this debate, however, was not limited to the peninsula: politicians in both Moscow and Kiev were also diving into this issue. Russian nationalist Rutskoi was only one of many Moscow politicians to travel to Crimea to assert Russia's claims to the peninsula and deny the legality of the 1954 transfer of Crimea to Ukraine. Debates over the proper ownership of the Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol also reflected growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine over the question of influence and power on the peninsula.

By the summer of 1993, demonstrations supporting greater Russian influence in Crimea were becoming commonplace. In Sevastopol, the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet, Russian nationalists were becoming particularly vocal. Parliamentary deputy Aleksandr Kruglov played a significant role in mobilizing Sevastopol's pro-Russia movement. Elsewhere on the peninsula, anger against what was perceived as Ukrainian economic incompetence and disregard for Crimean interests was also growing. The result of this rapidly escalating hostility toward
Ukraine was a decision by the Crimean parliament to establish the position of a Crimean presidency which would further enhance Crimea's political autonomy.

During the presidential campaign, the issue of Crimea's status relative to Ukraine and Russia took center stage. The candidates included Yuri Meshkov (chairman of the RDK and RPK), Mykola Bagrov (chairman of the Crimean parliament and former communist boss in Crimea), Leonid Grach (chairman of the Communist Party of Crimea), Sergei Shuvainikov (chairman of the Russian Party of Crimea), Ivan Yermakov (Ukrainian presidential representative to Sevastopol), and Verkoshansky (local entrepreneur). During the campaign, Meshkov tempered his earlier calls for complete Crimean independence and stronger ties with Russia; his calls for independence were uniformly vague and the meaning of the term defined in so many different ways as to leave no clear impression of his objectives. His leading opponent, Bagrov, supported a continuation of Crimea's affiliation with Ukraine, while Grach and Yermakov both supported an unspecified union of post-Soviet states. Shuvainikov interjected a lively element into the debate by calling openly for Crimea's secession from Ukraine and union with Russia. (His pro-Russia stance even earned him the explicit support of Russian nationalist Zhirinovsky!) Finally, Verkoshansky attempted to ignore the geopolitical issues and focus on the need for economic reform in Crimea.

Following the first round of voting the field was narrowed to Meshkov and Bagrov, confronting the population with a choice between an independence platform and continued affiliation with Ukraine. The outcome of this second round of voting was unambiguous with Meshkov winning a landslide victory of 73% of the votes. These results were further reinforced by the parliamentary elections in which the Russia Bloc (an umbrella for the RDK/RPK, People's Party of Crimea, and other pro-Russian parties) won 54 out of 94 seats. The new composition of the parliament represented a dramatic shift from the old in which only 28 of 196 seats were held by parties of the Russia Bloc. Pro-Ukrainian candidates failed to secure even one seat in the new parliament, while Crimean Tatar candidates won only the 14 seats allocated to them in the newly adopted quota system.

Following these stunning victories by the pro-Russian forces, Crimean politics radicalized dramatically. At the first session of the new parliament, Kruglov issued an emotional call for the reunification of Crimea with Russia, thus setting the tone for the new parliament. Parliamentary debate was overwhelmed by calls for Crimean independence or affiliation with Russia and all efforts at economic and political reform in Crimea were tabled in favor of these more important geopolitical issues. In May 1994, the new parliament voted to restore the

\[26\text{Krymskaya pravda, Feb. 1, 1994.}\]
controversial 1992 Crimean constitution, thus pitting Crimea once again in open opposition to Ukraine.

With Meshkov as president and a pro-Russian parliamentary majority, it seemed that pro-Russian forces were practically undefeatable. Interestingly enough, however, their ascendancy was shortlived. Within a month of the parliamentary elections, the Russia Bloc had collapsed amidst internal bickering. By fall of 1994, the president and parliament had moved into head-to-head conflict in a struggle for power. During this power crisis, Meshkov was ultimately forced to back down, thus substantially diminishing his power and discrediting his presidency.

Finally, on March 17, 1995, the Ukrainian parliament became fed up with Crimea’s refusal to revoke or revise its constitution to bring it into accordance with Ukrainian law. The Ukrainian parliament thus voted to annul Crimea’s constitution (along with numerous laws deemed in conflict with Ukrainian law) and abolish the post of the Crimean presidency. Meshkov and the Crimean parliament responded by appealing to various international institutions as well as the Russian duma to protect Crimea’s sovereignty. The international community, however, seemed inclined to let Crimea and Ukraine work out their own solution. And the Russian duma was less than enthusiastic about getting embroiled at a time in which Russia was immersed in its own secessionist crisis in Chechnya. Ivan Rybkin, chairman of the Russian duma summed up opinion well in saying, “This is an internal affair of Ukraine though we care a lot about it.”

Surprisingly enough, the Crimean population that had voted overwhelmingly for Meshkov and the Russia Bloc just a year before barely responded to Ukraine’s crackdown on Crimea’s political establishment. While Meshkov called on people to take to the streets, only a handful showed up at the rallies he organized (and there are numerous rumors that the few dozen supporters who turned out were in fact paid by Meshkov!) In fact, the population seemed fed up with the government’s obsession with geopolitical questions and inability to address the economic woes of the peninsula. In the aftermath of the Ukrainian crackdown, the pro-Russia forces were almost entirely discredited and the Crimean government collapsed. During the summer of 1995, a new coalition government was formed dedicated to working toward a peaceful and mutually acceptable solution to the Crimean-Ukrainian standoff.

In September 1995, the Crimean parliament adopted a new constitution thought by many to be far more in keeping with Ukrainian law. As of this writing, the Ukrainian parliament has ratified this constitution, though with some amendments. While parts of the constitution are

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still being contested by both sides, the Crimean government seems to have backed down from the radically pro-Russia, pro-independence platform that it espoused just a year ago.

Over the past year, the disintegration of the pro-Russia forces in Crimea has been obvious. The pro-Russia parties are largely in crisis, their leaders bickering amongst each other, and popular appeal on the wane. More centrist political forces appear to be gaining strength and the parliament may even be moving beyond questions of Crimean-Ukrainian relations to begin to address the very real economic problems confronting the population.

III. A Three Level Game?

In attempting to mobilize Crimean society, all of the key political actors focused on utilizing existing cleavages in society. Mobilizational appeals occurred along three major cleavages: ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological. Had politicians found a way to bring these three major fault lines into alignment in Crimean society, the path would have been laid for a powerful political movement. Interestingly enough, however, their attempts to manipulate existing cleavages and bring ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological dividing lines in synch with each other failed, thus seriously undermining the mobilizational potential of the competing parties and movements.

Ethnic Cleavages

Over the past five years, a number of overt and subtle attempts have been made to mobilize Crimean society on the basis of ethnicity. Many observers have warned of the tensions existing between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians on the peninsula and have described the Crimea as an ethnic powderkeg. Certainly such parties as the RPK, People’s Party of Crimea, and Russian Party of Crimea have been built upon the assumption of a significant division between Crimea’s Russian and Ukrainian population. But does such a divide actually exist in Crimean society?

In fact, there is little evidence to support claims of a strong Russian-Ukrainian ethnic cleavage in Crimea. Levels of intermarriage between Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea have been consistently high and unlike other inter-ethnic marriages have never been referred to by people in Crimea as “mixed” marriages. Likewise, there is no sign of ethnic separatism in Crimea’s educational institutions nor its cultural organizations. While ethnic cleavages are expected to penetrate deeply into all forms of social organization in severely divided societies, there is no evidence that this is the case in Crimea. As evidence of this, my own

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An indepth investigation into the environmental movement of Crimea (covering the 1986-95 period) shows no division within the movement along Ukrainian-Russian fault lines.

If, in fact, a cleavage does exist within Crimea’s Slavic population, there is strong evidence to support that it follows language rather than ethnic lines. While over 25% of Crimea’s population considers itself ethnic Ukrainian, only a mere 3.8% of the population is Ukrainian-speaking.29 For this tiny group, language issues have been important and there is evidence of a significant divide between the Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking population. Kiev sociologist Valeri Khmelko has carried out important survey work demonstrating the differences in attitudes amongst the Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking populations of Ukraine and Crimea. Given that such a cleavage, however, pits 80% of the population (Russian-speakers) versus less than 4% (Ukrainian-speakers), the description of Crimea as an ethnic powderkeg seems overblown at best.

Evidence that the Russian-Ukrainian ethnic divide has not been socially or politically important may also be found in the results of the 1994 elections. Analysis of the election results have shown that Meshkov and the Russia Bloc could not have won such overwhelming victories without substantial support from the ethnic Ukrainian community.30 Similarly, Khmelko’s analysis of the 1994 electoral results show a strong correlation between voting patterns and language divisions -- not ethnicities.31

If the cleavage between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, however, was not real, how can we explain the rise of the Russian nationalist movement in Crimea in 1994? I would argue that the key lies in the geopolitical and ideological platforms of the pro-Russian groups, rather than their ethnic appeal. By calling explicitly for independence and implicitly for stronger ties to Russia, Meshkov and the Russia Bloc appealed to a population frustrated by what was perceived as Ukrainian economic ineptitude. With most of the population of Crimea possessing strong ties to family and friends in Russia, news of Russia’s reform efforts and improvements in the Russian standard of living travelled quickly to Crimea. By 1994, the impression was widespread that life in Russia was on the rebound, while Ukraine continued along its path of economic deterioration. Affiliation with Russia rather than Ukraine thus seemed to promise much needed economic revival in a region suffering acutely from the post-1991 economic collapse.

29Interview with Valeri Khmelko, August 1995, Kiev.
31Interview with Valeri Khmelko, August 1995, Kiev. Khmelko is hoping to publish these results in a western journal during the upcoming year.
The promise of economic improvement that would accompany breaking free of Ukraine also incorporated an ideological element. It was argued that in the absence of Ukrainian tutelage, Crimea would be free to pursue the economic reforms so badly needed to turn the region around. Meshkov and the Russia Bloc were thus quite successful in shifting all of the blame for Crimea's ills from local politicians to Kiev.

Finally, it should be noted that while Meshkov and the Russia Bloc failed to appeal to ethnic cleavages in society, it is likely that their platform did resonate along language fault lines. With Ukraine constantly threatening to curtail Russian language instruction and television and the ever-greater usage of Ukrainian in all of Ukraine’s official activities, the overwhelming majority of Crimea’s population felt under potential threat of Ukrainianization. Thus, while not appealing to an ethnic cleavage in society, Meshkov and the Russia Bloc did succeed in mobilizing people along an important linguistic divide.

The rapid collapse of Meshkov and the entire pro-Russian strategy is thus not due to any diminution in the ethnic appeal of the movement. It was rather due to their failure to realize that the population was more concerned with economic than ethnic issues. In other words, throughout the 1994-95 period, Meshkov and others in his faction were playing to an audience that did not exist! Meanwhile, their real audience was judging the leadership on the basis of criteria that Meshkov and his bloc had little concern with.

Finally, it should also be noted that the fate of Meshkov and the Russia Bloc were also linked to events outside the peninsula. While much of Crimea’s population had been intrigued by the possibility of switching their affiliation from Ukraine to Russia in 1994, by 1995 the dangers and implausibility of such a program were becoming all too obvious. Russia’s invasion of Chechnya in December of 1994 held serious implications for Crimea that were broadly recognized in the region. First, it highlighted the possibility of a military solution in Crimea; worries that Crimea might become Ukraine’s Chechnya abounded on the peninsula. Second, it implied Russian entanglement in its own very serious internal crisis making Russian intervention in the Crimean situation even less likely than it had been previously. Moreover, in taking action against Chechen secessionists, Russia proclaimed the rights of the parent state to protect itself against a rebellious region and warned against other states interfering in the internal matters of Russia. Thus, the possible assistance or intervention of Russia into the Crimean-Ukrainian standoff which had been much hoped for by Russian nationalists in Crimea seemed ever less likely. For much of Crimea’s population, Russia’s invasion of Chechnya spelled the end of aspirations for Crimean independence or affiliation with Russia.

In sum, once the geopolitical platform of the pro-Russian, pro-Russia faction lost its appeal and the faction had shown its total inability to address the economic ills of the region,
Meshkov and members of the Russia Bloc were left with only ethnicity to base their appeal on. Unfortunately for them, however, the ethnic Ukrainian-Russian split that they depended on for support in fact did not exist in Crimean society. Thus, in 1995, the movement collapsed.

Throughout this discussion, it should be noted, attention has been focused on the possible ethnic divide between the two dominant groups in Crimea: Ukrainians and Russians. While a close look at these groups does not support claims of a powerful ethnic cleavage in society, such a cleavage does emerge when we turn our attention to Crimea’s other important ethnic community: the Crimean Tatars.

The Tatar Ethnic Cleavage

As of 1993, the Crimean Tatars made up only 11.7% of Crimea’s population. Despite their small numbers, however, this group does represent a potentially explosive factor in Crimean politics. To date, the Crimean Tatars have played a minimal role in Crimea’s elections and political processes; thus it would be easy to assume that the mobilizational potential of the Crimean Tatar parties and organizations is insignificant. Because the Tatars are not committed to playing within the rules of the game, however, we need to look beyond their role in parliamentary politics to establish the strength of the appeal of various Tatar organizations in society. How ethnically oriented are the various Crimean Tatar organizations and how successful have they been in mobilizing Tatar (and possibly non-Tatar) constituencies?

While the National Movement of Crimean Tatars (NDKT) has supported a political strategy that balances Tatar integration into Crimea’s political community with the maintenance of some degree of Tatar culture, the Organization of the Crimean Tatar National Movement (OKND) has pursued a far more ethnically-based strategy. As discussed earlier, the OKND platform is vehemently anti-assimilationist and stresses both the political autonomy and sociocultural isolation of the Crimean Tatar people. Given that the Mejlis which claims to represent all Crimean Tatars in the former USSR is composed only of members of this more ethnically based faction, the question arises as to how much support the OKND and Mejlis really have aroused within the Crimean Tatar population.

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32It might be wondered how Meshkov and the Russia Bloc could have been so misguided in their belief of a strong Ukrainian-Russian cleavage in Crimean society. The answer may lie in their lack of knowledge about their own society. In fact, the field of sociology is particularly poorly developed in Crimea. With almost no sociological centers dating back to the pre-perestroika period and only a handful of sociologists working in Crimea today, information about Crimean society is quite scarce. The best sociological work being done on Crimean society is almost exclusively directed by sociologists from Kiev and at present data on the true nature of Crimean society is only beginning to accumulate.

One clear signal of the OKND and Mejlis's popularity amongst Crimean Tatars can be found in the results of the parliamentary elections of 1994. In this election, the Crimean Tatars were allocated 14 seats. Both the Mejlis and the more moderate NDKT ran their own slate of candidates for these 14 slots. The Mejlis, however, won all 14 and thus the new parliament included only Crimean Tatars from the OKND/Mejlis faction. This certainly strongly supports the Mejlis contention that they are the rightful representatives of the Crimean Tatar people.

Given its ethnically exclusive platform, it is important to assess how influential the Mejlis may be in shaping Crimean politics. The Mejlis has long demanded recognition from both the Ukrainian and Crimean governments as the official representative body of the Crimean Tatars. Such an acknowledgement would enhance their influence and power considerably. Neither government, however, has been forthcoming on this issue. Thus, the Mejlis has been forced to work through the normal channels of parliamentary and government influence. Prior to the introduction of the quota system in 1994 (which was intended as a one time only concession), the Crimean Tatars were entirely without representation in the Crimean parliament. Vice-chairman of Mejlis, Refat Chubarev has also noted that because the Crimean Tatars are in the minority in all electoral districts of Crimea, without the quota system they would continue to be totally unrepresented in parliament. While the 14 seats denies them the dominant role in parliament that they have demanded, it nonetheless has allowed them to play an influential role in coalitions. In particular, following the March 1995 crackdown by the Ukrainian parliament which led to the disintegration of the dominant pro-Russia faction in the Crimean parliament, the Crimean Tatar bloc played an important role in the new coalition government. Their influence was extremely important in bringing about the resolution of the Ukrainian-Crimean standoff. In the government turnover that accompanied the collapse of the pro-Russia faction, members of the OKND/Mejlis also made significant advances in ministerial positions.

In the future, however, it is unclear whether the Crimean Tatars will be able to maintain their presence in the Crimean parliament and government; while the proposed Crimean constitution includes a proportional voting system which should assist in their representation, it ends the temporary quota system. Mejlis has voiced serious concerns that given the uncertain citizenship status of many of the returning Crimean Tatars, a proportional voting system will be inadequate to represent Tatar interests.34 The Mejlis has proposed an alternative structure of government which would provide equal representation for any ethnic group with over 10%.

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34Note demonstration of over 2000 Crimean Tatars protesting the proposed proportional voting system, Simferopol, Nov. 15, 1995. Reported by Open Media Research Institute, Nov. 16, 1995.
of the population; their proposal envisions a parliament that is 30% Russian, 30% Ukrainian, 30% Crimean Tatar, and 10% other minorities. The likelihood that such a proposal will be seriously considered by the non-Crimean Tatar population, however, appears slim.

Given the Mejlis’s ethnically exclusive platform and apparent popularity among the Crimean Tatar population, do we need to be concerned about an impending ethnic explosion in Crimea? This is a very difficult question to answer. Certainly there is evidence of a radical strand within the movement which seems to appeal particularly to Crimean Tatar youth. With Crimean Tatar unemployment levels high, strong perceptions of discrimination and prejudice, government resistance to land restitution for returning Crimean Tatars, and inadequate government assistance in their resettlement on the peninsula, an element of rage appears to be brewing within Crimean Tatar society. This anger exploded in June 1995 when two Tatar youth were killed in a Feodosiya market after refusing to pay tribute to the local mafia. Their deaths led to violent demonstrations and rampant destruction of property in Feodosiya and surrounding towns, culminating in their taking the head of the local militia hostage and beginning a march on Simferopol. The crisis was defused by the Mejlis’s call for a return to calm and order. Nonetheless it demonstrated the level of anger and resentment simmering within the Crimean Tatar population and the danger of violent confrontation in the future. And although the Mejlis stepped in to defuse the violence, their leadership has frequently hinted that they have not foreclosed a violent route if their needs are not met by their current strategy.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of Crimean Tatar public opinion is very slim and it is difficult to ascertain how prevalent this rage is in Crimean Tatar society. Several leaders of the Mejlis have threatened over the past two years to break away from the Mejlis and organize a more militant organization of Crimean Tatars. As of yet, however, these threats have come to naught. While there is much talk of the impending radicalization of the Crimean Tatar movement, it is unclear how much support for this route exists in the population.

In fact, existing sociological data tells us little about where Crimean Tatars stand on political and socio-cultural issues in general. Is the Mejlis correct in arguing that most Crimean Tatars view themselves as a separate community and reject integration into the larger Crimean population? Or is the support of this movement based more on its commitment to improve the economic situation of the returning Crimean Tatar population? While the OKND strongly

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1. This proposal was discussed in detail by Mejlis Vice-chair Refat Chubarev at a roundtable on ethnic representation in Crimea. Roundtable sponsored by Freedom House, July 21, 1995, Simferopol.
2. Key events were reported in Krymskaya pravda, June 27, 1995; June 29, 1995, and July 1, 1995. Especially interesting is an interview with the local militia chief taken hostage, Yaremenko, in Krymskaya pravda, July 6, 1995.
stresses the cultural and linguistic differences between the Crimean Tatars and the peninsula’s slavic population, there is substantial evidence that many Crimean Tatars are in fact assimilating into the larger population. For example, the dominant language used by Crimean Tatars is not Tatar but rather Russian. While the Mejlis has stressed the rebuilding of the Crimean Tatar language, their leaders have also admitted that this is an uphill battle.37 In addition, despite Mejlis attempts to create separate Crimean Tatar educational institutions, only one such school has been established to date. At the university level, Crimean Tatars appear well-represented at leading institutions such as Simferopol State University, and they appear to be entirely integrated into the university. And while some have argued that their Islamic faith might strongly differentiate Crimean Tatars from the dominant Slavic population, it should be noted that practically no fundamentalist strand has been discerned in Crimea and religion does not appear to play a central role in the cultural identity of the community.

Thus, it might be suggested that the danger of a Crimean Tatar explosion on the peninsula has been overstated. Preliminary evidence indicates that the ethnically exclusive approach of the Mejlis may not represent the majority opinion. That said, however, it should be noted that with social organizations on the peninsula we do see signs of ethnic cleavage. In the environmental movement, for example, Crimean Tatars are almost totally absent in all of the leading groups. Informal discussions with numerous Russians, Ukrainians, and Tatars have yielded a picture of social life that does appear to be divided along Slavic-Tatar ethnic lines.

While the OKND/Mejlis has attempted to mobilize the Crimean Tatar population along ethnic lines, it has also utilized geopolitical and ideological appeals to bolster its popularity. Thus, they have openly supported continued affiliation with Ukraine and economic measures which would enhance the well-being of the Crimean Tatar population. It should be noted, however, that their geopolitical and ideological stances always are secondary to their overriding concern with improving the economic and political standing of the population they represent.

In summary, while the pro-Russian parties erred in their attempts to mobilize people along a non-existent Russian-Ukrainian cleavage in society, it is still unclear how strong the Slavic-Tatar cleavage may be and how successful the OKND/Mejlis may be in mobilizing this group. Since the Ukrainian-Russian population makes up over 80% of the population, the failure of attempts to mobilize a strong inter-ethnic slavic cleavage bodes well for the peaceful resolution of Crimea’s crises. Given the much smaller presence of the Crimean Tatars on the

37Interview with Nadir Bekirov, chair of the department of law and politics of the Mejlis and member of parliament, July 18, 1995, Simferopol.
Mobilizing Multiple Cleavages

In following the political strategies of the competing factions in Crimean politics, it is obvious that all attempted to build on existing ethnic, geopolitical, and ideological cleavages in society. If in fact these three fault lines in society had been brought into alignment, it is likely that the region would have erupted into severe conflict. This is precisely what many observers predicted when they watched the rapid rise of Meshkov’s pro-Russian faction in 1994. Luckily, however, the cleavages did not fall into alignment and the movement disintegrated. The Russian-Ukrainian ethnic split that Meshkov hoped to capitalize on barely existed and did not coincide with geopolitical cleavages. Popular opinion on the question of Russian or Ukrainian affiliation for Crimea reflected economic and linguistic concerns, rather than ethnic, and thus ethnic and geopolitical cleavages did not reinforce each other. Finally, attitudes toward economic reform and other ideological issues did not show any substantial correlation with either ethnic identities or geopolitical platforms. In sum, Crimean society was saved from conflagration by its cross-cutting cleavages on these three key contested elements of their post-Soviet identity.

IV. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Despite dire warnings of impending conflagration on the Crimean peninsula, this analysis supports more optimistic conclusions. First, it indicates that the possibility that a powerful ethnic cleavage will ignite Russians against Ukrainians on the peninsula is low. While we still should be concerned about the ethnic isolation of the Crimean Tatars, they constitute such a small group on the peninsula that the concerns about a potential civil war in Crimea seem overblown.

Second, without the presence of strong Russian-Ukrainian ethnic animosity on the peninsula, the potential for the region to become the centerpiece of a violent struggle between Russia and Ukraine appears minimal. Without a powerful appeal to Russia by Crimea’s Russian population, any pretense for armed intervention in the region by Russia to help its Russian brethren is substantially lessened. With the collapse of Meshkov’s faction in 1995, only Sevastopol’s radical pro-Russia movement remains active in calling for Russian intervention.

In addition to the impact of the increasing moderation of Crimean politics, events within Russia itself indicate diminishing likelihood of Russian intervention in Crimea. As noted
earlier, Russia’s attempts to rein in its breakaway region of Chechnya have both entangled Russia in a messy internal crisis that limits its ability to pursue aggressive strategies beyond its borders and has forced Russia to explicitly demand universal recognition of the principle of non-intervention in the internal matters of CIS states. Even those most optimistic about Russian intervention in Crimea have been forced to recognize the ever diminishing likelihood of a Russian role in the region since December of 1994.

Several policy implications arise out of this study. On the question of ethnic conflict, the study has shown that our most serious concerns should lie with the possibility for violent confrontation between the Crimean Tatar population and the slavic majority. Thus, serious efforts should be concentrated on improving the economic and living situation of the Crimean Tatars and ensuring their adequate representation in Crimean political organs. Aid in resettlement and the construction of much needed infrastructure for the new Crimean Tatar communities should be an important goal of western governments and organizations. In addition, pressure should be put on the Ukrainian government to allocate adequate funds for these purposes. On the political front, western organizations need to continue to pressure both the Crimean and Ukrainian governments to institute procedures to ensure adequate Crimean Tatar representation in the government. Exclusion of the Crimean Tatars from the parliament and government would be likely to lead to radicalization of the Tatar movement and increased violence in the region.

On a geopolitical level, the greatest danger has been that of violent confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. The best way to avoid such confrontation lies with continued adherence to the principles of the immutability of post-Soviet boundaries and non-intervention into the affairs of neighboring post-Soviet states. In promoting its aggressive strategy against Chechnya, Russia has explicitly and implicitly endorsed both principles. While events in Chechnya may certainly arouse righteous indignation on human rights grounds, it is nonetheless important to recognize the implications of Russia’s actions and to accept the legitimacy of these key principles. This of course also implies that all claims to the Crimea by Russian politicians should be deemed unacceptable by western bodies.

In accordance with these principles, Ukraine’s crackdown on Crimean autonomy should not be condemned by western observers. Crimean and Ukrainian authorities should be

38 USAID programs aimed at improving infrastructure in Crimean Tatar communities (e.g., Bakhchiserai) represent an important step in this direction. The OSCE has also stressed the importance of channeling western aid to address Crimean Tatar concerns. See for example, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Max van der Stoel’s call for increased western aid to the Crimean Tatars, reported by ITAR-TASS, Jan. 25, 1996.
encouraged to negotiate the terms of their relationship without the outside intervention of Russian actors or western governments. Any assistance that western governments and international organizations can provide in facilitating negotiations between Ukraine and Crimea and assisting both parties to reach mutually acceptable compromises should, however, be encouraged.

Finally, Crimea’s failure to embark on economic reform has led to a drastic deterioration of the standard of living on the peninsula which could exacerbate existing ethnic and geopolitical tensions in the population. While most western efforts have focused on broader questions concerning the overall Ukrainian reform program, it would be worthwhile to focus some attention on reform efforts within Crimea itself. Western advisors in Simferopol are few and far between and most of Simferopol’s politicians suffer from a woeful lack of knowledge concerning how to introduce and implement economic reforms in the region. In addition, overwhelming economic corruption in Crimea has proved to be a significant obstacle to reform. Nonetheless, improvement in Crimea’s economic situation will be critical in allowing Crimea to break out of the seemingly never-ending cycle of crises that have afflicted the region since 1991.