

## Trouw (Dutch newspaper) report: De Krim, 18 March 2020

### In Crimea, the Russian spring has been blooming continuously for six years



A couple with Russian flags fluttered in front of parliament in Crimea on March 17, 2014. Photo: EPA.

Six years ago, Crimea officially joined Russia. Since then, Moscow has done everything it can to underline the Russian character of the peninsula. But how Russian is Crimea really? And what does the 'Russification' of the peninsula look like in practice?

**Author: Jarron Kamphorst**

Two teenagers stand in the square in front of the Crimean parliament building, located on Karl Marx Street in Simferopol. The boy with the "I-heart-Russia" cap is holding a ghetto blaster that plays Russian-language rap. The girl dances awkwardly. They burst out laughing at the chorus. Elderly people who feed the scurrying pigeons in the adjacent Park of Victory look sullenly in their direction. Under the bare branches, a Red Army tank commemorates the liberation from the Nazis. In the background, the golden, onion-shaped domes of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral sparkle

in the sunlight. Nothing on the central square in the Crimean capital betrays what happened here six years ago.

Yet this same square was briefly the epicenter of world history at the time. Early on February 27, 2014, armed men in army uniforms occupied the parliament building of Simferopol. A drab gray concrete Soviet colossus that casts a permanent shadow over the square. The anonymous commandos with no badges on their sleeves hoisted the Russian flag over the building and proclaimed the Russian takeover. On March 18, 2014, Crimea officially joined Russia. The Russian tricolor still waves in front of the entrance to the parliament brotherly next to that of the Crimea. Above the entrance of the building where the Ukrainian trident once hung, now stands the two-headed Russian eagle.

But the symbolism can also be more subtle, as evidenced by a modest monument of a soldier and a child next to the parliament's fleet. The statue is a tribute to the so-called 'little green men', or 'polite people' as Moscow baptized the nameless Russian commandos. The artwork shows a soldier in combat gear with a helmet, camouflage clothing and a Kalashnikov on his back. He smiles faintly as he receives a bunch of flowers from a girl with a ponytail and a dress. A cat circles gracefully between its legs.

## **Putin stares carelessly into space**

It goes without saying that there is a tribute to the Russian soldiers on the square, according to Alla Ponomarenko (59), Deputy Speaker of the Parliament in Crimea. She is sitting behind her desk in her office in the parliament building. Above her head, Vladimir Putin stares carelessly into space from the wall.

"The military protected us in 2014 against the evil forces that were active in Ukraine at the time. Just before that, extremists staged a coup to depose President Yanukovich. Thanks to the Russian soldiers, that didn't happen here. We are grateful to them for that." Ponomarenko, a member of the ruling United Russia party, was one of many residents of the peninsula to welcome Russia's spring of 2014. "I speak, think and dream in Russian. Just like most people in Crimea." She compares pre-2014 Crimea to a neglected child. "Ukraine did not take good care of Crimea. We were unwanted. A bastard."

There are plenty of examples of this neglect. For example, Kiev banned the Russian language on the peninsula, she says. Although the vast majority of the population has Russian as their mother tongue, cinemas had to dub films into Ukrainian and theater companies were also forced to perform their plays in Ukrainian. And in the public space, monuments of Russian war heroes and artists were pulled from their pedestals

en masse. "Kiev tried to rewrite our history," says Ponomarenko. "But those times are over now."



Alla Ponomarenko , Deputy Speaker of the Parliament in Crimea: "Crimea is Russian and always has been". Photo: Jarron Kamphorst

## History falsification? No

The fact that the Russians have been pouring their version of the past over Crimea since 2014, on the other hand, has nothing to do with history falsification, according to Ponomarenko. "That is a matter of the correct representation of historical facts. Crimea is Russian and always has been." That pro-Russian sentiment resonates throughout the peninsula. White-blue-and-red flutters everywhere; on central squares, facades and billboards are enthusiastic declarations of love from the Russians to the people of Crimea; a portrait of Putin hangs in many classrooms and living rooms; and in schools the Russian language predominates.

In the context of the same historical correctness, in Ekaterininsky Park, a stone's throw from the parliament, in 2016 a meter-high statue of Catherine the Great was raised on a plinth. Under the tsarina, who in 1783 was the first Russian ruler to conquer Crimea from the Ottoman Empire, the unequivocal text "this monument has been rebuilt in honor of the reunification of Crimea with Russia in 2014 and forever" is displayed.

If there's one place in Crimea where such ludicrous patriotism is rampant, it's Sevastopol, the region's largest city. Traditionally, the port city has been the bastion of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and maintains warm ties with the mainland. Visitors therefore stumble over the patriotic symbolism. From Russian frigates floating in the water along the sea boulevard to souvenir shops with Putin knick-knacks and from monuments to fallen marines of the Black Sea Fleet to military museums. Mother Russia is everywhere.

## Tsarist wealth

Not that crazy either. Sevastopol is in many ways the crown jewel of Crimea. The city has pretty much everything most Russian cities don't have. The streets are lined with polished, stark white neoclassical buildings and the sea is so blue that the water and sky on the horizon are difficult to distinguish. There are hardly any gray Soviet flats to be seen. On the contrary. The city breathes tsarist wealth. Military-imperialist nostalgia drips from her pores.

The history of Sevastopol leaves no doubt about it, according to Natasha Nikolaevich (42), saleswoman at the central market. She enthusiastically talks about her city from behind a market stall with fruit and vegetables. On her head she wears a fur hat. The thing is so far over her forehead that her eyebrows disappear under it. "The three most important historical persons of Sevastopol are all Russian. Tsarina Catherine the Great conquered the city, Colonel Pavel Nachimov defended the city during the Crimean War and Vladimir Putin brought the city back home. How clear do you want it to be?"

Marina Dimitrojeva, a seventies with a hunchback and the voice of an inveterate smoker, was also spoon-fed with a love for Russia. "My mother passed away in 2012. On her deathbed she said she hoped I would soon live in Russia," she says as she fills her shopping bags with ingredients for borscht. "Unfortunately, she was not allowed to experience the return to the motherland."

## **Arbitrary arrests**

The figures also seem to endorse the Russian nature of Crimea. In 2014, 70 percent of Crimea's 2.2 million inhabitants were ethnically Russian, and that percentage has been rising steadily since the Russian takeover. According to official statistics from the Russian government, more than 250,000 people settled in Crimea from the Russian mainland between March 2014 and May 2018. At the same time, according to the same figures, more than 140,000 people left in the same period. These are almost exclusively Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians who moved north towards the Ukrainian mainland.

It is not without reason that precisely those two ethnic minorities pack their bags en masse. According to aid organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Muslim Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians have suffered massive victims in Crimea since 2014. The human rights organizations speak of an exodus and point to political persecutions and arbitrary arrests as the main reason for the "Russification" and homogenization of Crimea. According to the Ukrainian government, the Russian migration figures are therefore inaccurate. Kiev claims that the number of people who have now fled for political reasons is between 800,000 and one million.

A now mythical example of this arbitrary criminal prosecution is the case of Volodimir Baluch. Shortly after the Russian occupation in March 2014, Baluch hung a Ukrainian flag several times at his farm in Crimea. After several house searches and a beating by the security services, he was finally arrested for alleged possession of weapons. A five-year sentence followed.



Lyubov Prikhodko constantly worries about the fate of her arrested husband.  
Photo: Jarron Kamphorst.

### **Cables, empty bottles and fuel**

"The same fate befell my husband," says Lyubov Prikhodko (58). In her rural home in the village of Saki, army caps hang from the barrels of two plastic machine guns on the wall. Yellow-blue ribbons dangle from the handles. The colors of the Ukrainian flag also hang above the wooden bench and the national trident adorns the fireplace. "On October 9, 2019, the security services invaded here," says Prikhodko. She takes hasty drags on her cigarette. In front of her is an ashtray full of butts. The insomnia is etched in her face.

"They wanted to see my husband's workshop. Back here in the garage." It took a few minutes before they found what they were looking for: cables, some equipment, empty bottles and fuel. Enough to assume that Oleg Prikhodko was planning a terrorist attack against the Russian state and to arrest him. They took him to Simferopol where he is still imprisoned. "Since then, sleeping is no longer an option," says Prikhodko. "I leave the lights on at night and doze off in front of the TV. If I don't, I'll be worrying about my husband's fate." Because his future is still uncertain. "A few days ago his pre-trial detention was extended by two months. He may end up in prison for twenty years."

The real reason Oleg Prikhodko was arrested by the authorities, according to his wife, is his membership in the Ukrainian political party Svoboda. A far-right and nationalist party that manifested itself prominently in Kiev during the 2014 protests against Ukrainian President Yanukovich. Svoboda is notorious for its homophobic, anti-Semitic and xenophobic views. Many people therefore call the party and its members fascist.

## **Obsessed with plastic soldiers and weaponry**

Sheer nonsense according to Lyubov Prikhodko. "My husband is not a fascist. He's a patriot, that's something completely different." According to her, the fact that there are two model tanks with swastikas in the cupboard in the living room says nothing at all about the ideology that her husband adheres to. "My husband is a modeling fanatic, an obsessive collector of all things World War II. The fact that there are a few models of the German army in between does not make him a fascist." A tour of the house does indeed give the impression of someone who is obsessed with plastic soldiers and weaponry. There are staged miniature battlefields everywhere and the bookcases contain a few feet of information and picture books about the Second World War.

According to Prichodko, the real fascists are a little further on at a military airbase. At every turn she has to stop her story because fighter jets fly over her house. "It is as if we live here in a besieged area. Every day the occupier literally flies over my head here. The same occupier who arrested my husband and threw him behind bars. Russia is ready to silence, imprison or deport anyone who does not recognize Crimea as Russian territory. That is their way of making Crimea Russian."

## **An information war**

A claim that refers Ponomarenko to the land of fables. According to the Deputy Speaker of the Crimean Parliament, there are no human rights violations on the peninsula. "That kind of message is all part of an information war. Crimea has always been a place where different peoples of different ethnicities lived side by side. There is no prosecution based on background here."

"Tell that to those dozens of political prisoners," Prichodko snarls. "They are trying to create a homogeneous society here with only Russians. An artificial image to make the outside world believe that it has always been Russian here. But they will have to drag me by the hair here. And until then this will hang here", she points to the Ukrainian flag near a shelter in her garden. Next to it hangs a text carved in wood. "For order. For the win. For freedom. For the future of Ukraine," she translates.

“Because Crimea will never become Russian. It doesn't matter how many monuments they put up or how many flags they ban.”

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The first train will cross the new railway bridge between Crimea and the Russian mainland on Monday. The connection is yet another monumental infrastructure project on the peninsula with which Moscow literally connects the annexed region. But the Kremlin also gives generously on a micro level. **Can Crimea survive without its sugar daddy?**

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