



Disinformation against Crimean Tatars in Russian Social Media: Communication Dynamics During the First Year of Russia’s Full- Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of Tatarophobia against Crimean Tatars in the Russian segment of social media during the first year of the full-scale invasion (24 February 2022–24 February 2023). A total of 4,435 posts from various social media platforms, including Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, Twitter, and Vkontakte, were analysed. The discourse predominantly echoes Russia’s imperial and Soviet-era narratives, along with xenophobic and oppressive rhetoric exacerbated by the full-fledged invasion. The propaganda seeks to cultivate a negative perception of Crimean Tatars as an ethnic community, manipulating cultural and historical aspects related to them. Additionally, it endeavours to construct an adversarial image of relations between Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars, as well as of Ukraine’s current policies. Russian special services perceive the capacity of Crimean Tatars to self-organize, establish volunteer units, or organize blockades as a threat. The propaganda effort not only fosters harassment and hate speech but also encourages peninsula residents to view them as “unreliable elements” deserving of suppression.

Keywords: *Crimean Tatars; Crimea; Russian propaganda*

Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's seizure of Crimea in February 2014, the majority of the Crimean Tatar community has continuously opposed the Kremlin's annexation. The Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' self-governing body that existed since 1991, has consistently refuted that Crimea is part of Russia (Radio Liberty, 2023). When Russia held a sham "referendum" in March 2014 to legitimize its military seizure of Ukrainian territory, the majority of Crimean Tatars boycotted the vote, considering it a deceptive guise (BBC Ukraine, 2014).

To justify its attacks on the Crimean Tatars, the Russian government has labelled them as "extremists", fabricating a pseudo-legal basis for its actions. Many Crimean Tatars identify themselves as Muslims, and before the annexation a Muslim religious political organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir, functioned legally. In Russia, unlike in other countries, it has been declared a terrorist organization. Russian special forces have used this situation after the annexation of the peninsula as a pretext to oppress the Crimean Tatars; authorities have accused them of links to Hizb ut-Tahrir, and have brought up several trumped-up terrorism charges (Soboleva, 2017, p. 56). Similar unfounded allegations consistently appear in all the researched social media discussions concerning Crimean Tatar matters. In 2016, Russia banned the Mejlis, branding it as an extremist organization. Russia has targeted various Crimean Tatars who have spoken out against its occupation, including journalists, photographers, and political activists. These groups represent the most visible and direct opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea (European Parliament, 2019). The detainees' families formed the foundation of Crimean Solidarity, uniting diverse individuals who had previously been adversaries, now drawn together by the shared threat of Russian state repression (Muratova, 2019, p. 56).

This examination of the Russian social media landscape reveals that the depiction of Crimean Tatars in the Russian segment of social media frequently relies on imperial and Soviet-era prejudices and stereotypes. This has led to propaganda that fuels feelings of mistrust and hostility towards the Crimean Tatar community within Russian society. In the initial part of this article, we delve into a retrospective examination of stereotypes dating back to the previous century, which persist to the present day and continue to perpetuate Tatarophobia. The Russian media frequently portrays Crimean Tatars as a threat to the security and stability of Russia. They are often labelled as "terrorists", "religious fanatics", "Nazi collaborators", and even as those who destroyed the Soviet Union (Ukraina.ru, 2022; Politcom.ru, 2010). These negative labels contribute to a hostile environment for Crimean Tatars in occupied

Crimea.

Furthermore, the Russian discourse in social media has downplayed the historical and cultural significance of Crimean Tatars in the region, portraying them as a small and insignificant minority. This was used to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, where the "green men" (soldiers wearing green uniforms without any insignia; initially, top Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, denied any involvement by Russia, however, Putin later began to boast that the soldiers were indeed Russian) claimed they were protecting ethnic Russians on the peninsula from the Crimean and Ukrainian "radicals" (Nakanune.ru, 2014). The media also depicted Crimean Tatars as oppressed by the Ukrainian authorities and as supporters of Crimean separatist movements, further justifying Russia's actions.

This article illustrates the persistence of Tatarophobia, tracing its historical roots while primarily delving into its contemporary complexities within the Russian segment of social media. The first section investigates the stereotypes utilized to stigmatize the Crimean Tatars during the imperial and Soviet eras and examines the portrayal of Crimean Tatars through the Russian perspective from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Further sections primarily scrutinize the key manipulations of the public image of the Crimean Tatars during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The research explores the manipulations in the Russian segment of social media that contribute to fostering a negative perception of the Crimean Tatars as an ethnic and religious community. It analyses the portrayal of Crimean Tatars as militant and religious extremists, the suggestions of rivalry between Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars, the marginalization of the Crimean Tatars aligned with Ukraine, and the manipulation of cultural issues.

1. Stigmatization of the Crimean Tatars during imperial and Soviet times

The Crimean Tatars had been the dominant ethnic group in Crimea for a significant period, and until the late 1800s they constituted the largest proportion of the peninsula's population. The Russian Empire subjected them to oppression and semi-forced relocation between 1783 and 1900 (Williams, 2016). For a hundred years, the colonization policy of tsarism led to radical changes in the socio-cultural, ethno-confessional, economic, and political situation on the peninsula. From being the de facto dominant ethnic group of the Crimean Khanate, Crimean Tatars became a politically, socially, culturally, religiously, and economically oppressed ethnic minority in their own land. The policy of the Russian Empire led to several waves of mass emigration of Crimean Tatars from Crimea, which caused great damage to the demographic

potential of the indigenous people. There were three major waves of emigration: after 1783, between 1853–56, and after 1917 (Muratova, 2009, p. 264). If, at the end of the 18th century, Crimean Tatars made up more than 90% of the population of the peninsula, then in 1864, this was only half, and their share continued to decrease (data by Krichinsky, 1919, cited in Muratova, 2009, p. 264). Over the course of the 20th century, the number of Crimean Tatars in Crimea also decreased in absolute numbers.

During its time as a khanate under the Ottoman Empire's protection, the Crimean peninsula held strategic significance. The Russian Empire viewed this arrangement as a potential threat from the south, as it aimed to secure access to vital warm-water seas. Then, shaped by tsarist imperial ideology, Russian historiography presented the military gains of the Russian Empire as a gathering of the Russian lands and Byzantium ancestry, with the annexation of Crimea forming part of this process. The idea of consolidating Russian territories during Catherine II's reign, notably in relation to Ukraine, was complemented by the fresh geopolitical notion of Russia as the heir to the Byzantine Empire. Consequently, Russia staked a territorial claim to the Crimean peninsula, which had been partially affiliated with the principality of Tmutarakan and Byzantium during the medieval period. Catherine II even contemplated the possibility of incorporating Istanbul, the erstwhile Constantinople, into Russian territory. Russians inhabiting Crimea have historically constituted the main threat to Crimean Tatar interests (Magocsi, 2014, pp. 41-87). Historically, a strong distrust of the Russian state was formed due to the circumstances associated with their original settlement as a conquering force in Crimea, and their oppression of the Crimean Tatars during the wars with Turkey, the 1917 Revolution and subsequent civil war, and then during collectivization. (Potichnyj, 1975, p. 314). These attitudes remain a potent influence on ethnic relations in Crimea.

The historiography of both tsarist and later Soviet eras can be considered as a way of interpreting history and legitimizing the ruling *de facto* colonial regime. In these accounts, Crimea has never been acknowledged as the ancestral land of the Crimean Tatars. Before World War II, Soviet historiography portrayed the peninsula as a prime example of harmonious interethnic relations. After the war, historical accounts were reshaped to align with Soviet ideology. The prevailing Soviet narrative asserted that the Crimean Tatars seamlessly integrated into the new territories to which they were deported: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Mari ASSR, the southern Urals, and the Kostroma region (Uehling, 2004, p. 79). Moreover, it highlighted the naturally Russian (Slavic) character of Crimea while portraying the Crimean Tatars as an underdeveloped group that struggled to assimilate into the

region. Soviet propaganda also reiterated the image of the Tatars as a plundering, raiding, and belligerent nation (Sasse, 2014, p. 68).

After the deportation of 1944, Soviet rule waged war on the authentic toponyms of Crimea to eradicate the memory of the former inhabitants of the peninsula. Between 1945 and 1948, almost all the placenames of Crimean Tatar origin (over 80% of the total number of settlements) were changed (Ukrainian State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, 2023). The Soviet official narrative alleged that Crimean Tatars betrayed the Soviet Union, deserted from the Red Army, and sided with the Nazis. It said that during the occupation of the peninsula, the Crimean Tatars participated in the German auxiliary police and “especially distinguished themselves by their brutal reprisals against Soviet partisans, and also helped the German invaders in organizing the forcible deportation of Soviet citizens into German slavery and the mass extermination of Soviet people” (from a Soviet State Defense Committee Decree of 1944, State Defense Committee, 1944). For instance, these stereotypes persisted in 2014 during the annexation of Crimea. It was believed that Crimean Tatars collaborated with the Nazis and were tasked with eliminating the Soviets. Consequently, Stalin purportedly “rescued” them from the wrath of the peninsula’s inhabitants after World War II and just “relocated” them from Crimea to Central Asia (VICE News, 2014). The persistent portrayal of Crimean Tatars as ‘traitors who betrayed their homeland’ remains unchanged despite efforts to alter it. This convenient Tatarophobia succinctly captures the fundamental perception of Crimean Tatars as distinct, culpable, and deserving of retribution, resonating deeply within societal consciousness (Uehling, 2015, p. 13).

Three years after Stalin’s death, the new Soviet leader Khrushchev rehabilitated the “deported peoples”; however, he upheld the prohibition that prevented the Crimean Tatars from returning to their homeland. Despite the fact that the injustice of these deportations was recognized by the Supreme Soviet, the Crimean Tatars did not obtain the right to repatriation or restitution (Nikolko, 2018, p. 73). They were not permitted to come back to Crimea in substantial numbers until the conclusion of the Gorbachev era, following the weakening of the Soviet government and the collapse of the USSR (Uehling, 2004, p. 82).

The memory of the deportation has emerged as a foundational story shaping the national identity of the Crimean Tatars, as it remains a relatively recent event; some individuals directly impacted are still alive today and many families still recount stories of relatives who perished. Moreover, the deportation symbolized the forcible separation of the Crimean Tatars from their homeland, leading to the loss of territory and political agency, transforming them into a

stigmatized group labelled as “traitors”, resulting in a collective trauma that persists to this day (Muratova, 2022, p. 272).

The official Soviet narrative produced numerous messages that discredited the Crimean Tatars and this pattern persists to the present day. Firstly, the Crimean Tatars purportedly induced Soviet soldiers to abandon their combat positions and hide in local communities. Secondly, the retreating Soviet troops were allegedly met with hostility and blatant aggression from the Crimean Tatars. Thirdly, during the Nazi occupation of the peninsula, the Crimean Tatars were purportedly in a more favourable position than other groups as they could purchase more goods and receive property for their loyalty. Fourthly, the Crimean Tatars were expected to be grateful to Joseph Stalin, who “saved” them from the righteous indignation of Red Army veterans who viewed the indigenous people as traitors. Finally, Crimean Tatars who joined the auxiliary police were depicted as more ruthless than the Nazis (Snigyr, 2022 p. 56). During the mid-1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union’s policy of disregarding religious beliefs affected Muslim communities, including those in the Ukrainian SSR. To preserve their traditions, Muslims often practiced their religion discreetly within small local communities. This was particularly true for the Crimean Tatars, as well as the Volga Tatars and those exiled to Central Asia in 1944 (Bogomolov et al., 2006, p. 29).

In general, Crimea’s purported “Russian” identity was emphasized in the post-war Soviet era. However, as the late Soviet period revised this, the emphasis diminished. The consistent disparagement of the Crimean Tatars was abandoned, and Crimea’s historical multiethnicity was taken seriously (Sasse, 2014, p. 69). The predominant post-Soviet perspective on Crimea preserved its Russocentric character. Crimea’s history is seen as a sequence of settlements and wars, culminating with the Russian “unification” with Crimea in the late 18th century. History is void of references to imperial policies towards the Crimean Tatars. Instead, Crimea is still presented as a symbol of Russian imperial power.

2. Crimean Tatars’ image through the Russian looking glass: 1991 to 2014

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the topic of the Crimean Tatars was not widespread in the official Russian discourse for at least three reasons. First, many historical facts that were previously kept silent became public, so it was “inconvenient” to stir up the tragic story of the deportation of 1944 and the repressive practices against this ethnic group in the following decades. Secondly, the repatriation process of the late 1980s and early 1990s somewhat undermined the Soviet discourse that the Crimean Tatars assimilated well in the new territories

to which they were forcibly deported. The fact that if you go to Wikipedia, you will only find articles on the repatriation of the Crimean Tatars in Ukrainian and English, and not in Russian, is quite revealing (Wikipedia, 2023).

In the Soviet Union, common knowledge about the Crimean Tatars was limited and strongly influenced by official propaganda, which, in turn, absorbed the features of the tsarist predatory and expansionist narratives. For its part, Russian post-Soviet propaganda inherited the key points of the previous two periods. The official Russian discourse did not place a significant emphasis on the topic of the Crimean Tatars as an indigenous people of the peninsula. Instead, the focus was predominantly on Crimea itself, particularly as the base of the Black Sea fleet. Consequently, the subject of the Crimean Tatars attracted the attention of academicians, dating back to the 18th century, rather than the general public.

The Russian leadership was not enthusiastic about acknowledging Crimea as part of another state during the 1990s. The recognition by Russia of Ukraine's borders in 1997 took the wind out of the former pro-Russian separatist movement in Crimea, which was quite strong in the first half of the 1990s (later it was marginalized). Despite acknowledging Crimea's status as part of Ukraine, some disagreements emerged. In 1998-1999, a treaty was ratified by Ukraine and Russia, which officially recognized Crimea as part of Ukraine. However, it took an additional five years to delimit the land border between the two countries. Despite this, Russia remained unwilling to agree to delimit the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait adjacent to Crimea or to demarcate its land borders with Ukraine. Indeed, while there were some disagreements concerning the fleet, such as ship locations, their modernization, and ownership of lighthouses, the most notable incident leading up to the annexation of Crimea was undoubtedly the 2003 Tuzla Island conflict (Kuzio, 1997, p. 29). It was a somewhat daring move, but the focal point of the dispute centred on control of the Kerch Strait, with Crimea scarcely broached. There was no distinct assertion of rights over Tuzla, and the construction of the dam appeared to have taken place in a semi-official capacity. Concurrently, there was a campaign disseminating the notion that Tuzla might be classified as a spit rather than an island. A campaign was orchestrated to assert that this is an isthmus connected to the Russian coast, rather than a fully independent island belonging to Ukraine. The discord was largely downplayed once Ukraine agreed to engage in discussions regarding passage through the strait. While it is evident that Russia held intentions concerning the peninsula, one might argue that these aspirations were not as vigorously pursued.

A propagandistic historical narrative, asserting Russia's entitlement to seize Crimea, legitimized its aggressive actions in 2014. Needless to say, Russia had no intention of recognizing the Crimean Tatars' claims to Crimea as their ancestral home.

3. Methodology

My discourse analysis – structural, and semiotic in nature – as a study of media texts aims to uncover the hidden meanings of the text, its context of creation, and the potential interpretations by the consumer of the information. Words and messages were subjected to analysis and were divided into subgroups (semiotic segments), as well as arranged in a way that permitted me, as a researcher, to compare, contrast, analyse, and seek out specific patterns.

While selecting media sources for analysis, non-conventional sources were prioritized due to their popularity among Russians, as demonstrated by the research from Russia's "Fond obshchestvennogo mneniia" Foundation. In the past five years, the majority of Russians have turned to online sources for their news, with most users utilizing news aggregators and social media (Fond obshchestvennogo mneniia, 2022). Furthermore, I have chosen to focus specifically on social media due to its relatively less restrictive content regulations in comparison to traditional media sources, which are closely monitored by government entities and watchdogs. Analysing social media enables gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the media landscape, including reader commentaries and discussions. In addition, social media enables us to observe not just the narratives of official propaganda, but also how these narratives are received or challenged by users, and whether they persist and spread among users on informal platforms.

Amidst the commencement of a comprehensive assault on Ukraine by Russian forces, the Russian state communications regulatory agency, Roskomnadzor, has taken measures to restrict access to Facebook and Twitter, resulting in the disenfranchisement of a substantial number of ordinary Russian citizens from dependable sources of information. Concurrently, the government has passed legislation that criminalizes the dissemination of purportedly false reports regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Nonetheless, I have chosen to incorporate a data set sourced from Facebook and Twitter, as it augments the comprehensiveness of the information at hand.

As a researcher, I employed publicly available data that users had permitted to be collected and processed for my analysis. The social networks that were examined (namely Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, Twitter, and V Kontakte) have their own policies

governing the acquisition, processing, and storage of data. The policies of each network were meticulously evaluated, taking into consideration the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) when gathering and analysing data from the abovementioned social media. I relied on data providers that were either the social media platforms themselves or certified companies to ensure compliance with pertinent regulations and ethical standards.

When referring to the Russian segment of social media, we are talking about content shared by profiles, pages, groups, and channels based in Russia, or have indicated Russia as their location, or are identified as Russian by the data providers.

The procedure of analysing n-grams (the selection of a frequently used sequence of characters from a data array) involves the automated identification and collection of the most commonly utilized words and phrases within texts. A tone analysis of text is accomplished by automatically ascertaining whether posts are positive, negative, or neutral. Employing topic modelling enabled the automatic determining of the subject matter of posts and obtaining a summary of the content contained within the messages. The algorithm presupposes that the messages encompass multiple topics, each of which includes frequently occurring words and phrases. However, after being generated automatically, the topics were labelled manually.

As part of this research, 4,435 posts on social media were obtained via Semantrum media monitoring centre and analysed: 870 messages on Facebook, 458 messages on Odnoklassniki, 1,481 messages on Telegram, 94 messages on Twitter, and 1,532 messages on Vkontakte using the search terms “Crimean Tatars | Mejlis | Kurultay | Crimean Tatar issue | Eyvaz Umerov | Hizb ut-Tahrir | Refat Chubarov | Mustafa Dzhemilev | Rustem Nimetullaev | mobilization of Crimean Tatars) & (Crimean Tatars | mobilization”. Part of these results was previously presented in my article “‘Tatar Banderites’ and ‘Extremists’: How Russian Propaganda Discredits Crimean Tatars” (Bidochko, 2023).

4. Negative narrative constructions regarding Crimean Tatars: Examining identity manipulation and historical context

The obtained messages about Crimean Tatars for the researched period were divided into three categories:

- 1) *enhancing a negative image of the Crimean Tatars as a community* – marking them as extremists, separatists, neo-Nazis, collaborators, religious fundamentalists, unreliable elements, an ethnic group that fights for Ukraine but is expected to side with Russia;

- 2) *constructing an adverse image of the relations between Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars and Ukraine's current policy* – Crimean Tatars that reside in the peninsula stand against Ukraine; Crimea is not part of the Ukrainian ancestral homeland of the Crimean Tatars; Ukraine persecutes Crimean Tatars; Ukraine artificially provokes enmity between the Crimean Tatars and the Russians;
- 3) *manipulating cultural and historical issues* – challenging the sombre chapters in the history of the Crimean Tatars, portraying them as dependent on Russia for survival, with their rights seen as only being safeguarded by Russia, creating an impression of inferiority compared to Russians.

4.1 Enhancing a negative image of the Crimean Tatars as militant and religious extremists (43%):

- The Crimean Tatars are “vindictive”; they have a strong collective memory about the deportation of 1944, so today they are taking revenge on the Russians by participating in the underground resistance and carrying out terrorist acts (in the framework of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization’s activities) (Karaulny Z Telegram channel (2)).
- Many Crimean Tatars are members of some “terrorist” pro-Ukrainian organizations, like the Ateş military partisan movement or Hizb ut-Tahrir religious political organization; they commit acts of sabotage against the Russian military and serve as fire spotters for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Noman Çelebicihan Crimean Tatar volunteer battalion and Turan battalion consist of neo-Nazis (Readovka Telegram channel).
- Crimean Tatars often dodge getting drafted into the Russian army. If they claim Crimea to be their homeland, they should defend it (Montyan! Telegram channel).

According to the Ukrainian Parliament’s Commissioner for Human Rights, out of the 307 political prisoners currently being unlawfully detained by Russia in Crimea, 206 are Crimean Tatars (Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 2024). The human rights group Crimea SOS has reported that a minimum of one-third of the politically motivated convictions on the peninsula were carried out after the commencement of the full-scale Russian invasion, with a majority of them targeting individuals alleged to have links with the Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Noman Çelebicihan Crimean Tatar volunteer battalion (CrimeaSOS, 2022).

Following the annexation of Crimea, the Russian authorities have been aggressively targeting Hizb ut-Tahrir members. News of their arrests, trials, and convictions has been frequently reported in the Russian media since 2014. Such publications emphasize the

purportedly unreliable, dangerous, and radical beliefs of the accused individuals (Montyan Chat Telegram channel). Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Russia but legal in Ukraine, is an international pan-Islamic political organization whose primary objective is to unify all Muslims in one state that arose in response to the emergence of Israel. Hizb ut-Tahrir promotes non-violent methods of struggle, such as spreading ideas through education, discussions, and brochures. The Russian human rights centre Memorial believes that the persecution of Hizb ut-Tahrir members is politically motivated (Memorial Human Rights Center, 2022). The European Court of Human Rights characterized Hizb ut-Tahrir as a peaceful, transnational Muslim organization (Vasilyev and others vs. Russia, 2008). As per Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service, a majority of those convicted for terrorism in Russia are Muslims (CrimeaSOS, 2022). This leads to a propaganda discourse aiming to link the Crimean Tatars with Islam, creating an automatic (and even instinctive, initially) association of Crimean Tatars with some forms of extremism.

Depicted as religious extremists, Crimean Tatars are pushed towards and provoked into committing terrorist acts and participating in extremist behaviour, thus validating the propagandistic narrative and reinforcing state control over their community life. In response, the Crimean Tatars' compliant and obedient behavior serves as an implicit defiance to the enforced narrative and, consequently, the authority of Russian governance (Shynkarenko, 2022, p. 92).

Additionally, anonymous Russian Telegram channels often accuse Crimean Tatars of collaborating with Ukrainian special services, carrying out subversive activities, mining territories, assisting the Ukrainian Army in finding targets, and engaging in acts of sabotage (Pravyi kurs Telegram channel). "Saky airbase attack" and "Group of the Crimean Tatars convicted by Russia for connections with Ukraine" peaks only confirm this point (see Table 6 at the end of this section). In August 2022, nine or more Russian warplanes appear to have been damaged or destroyed in the attack on Saky airbase in Crimea, according to newly released satellite images. Ukraine has not publicly claimed responsibility for the attack. In January 2023, 32 persons were sentenced to administrative arrests for 10 to 16 days. Searches took place in the homes of Crimean Tatars with the participation of FSB officers in the Dzhankoy district of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. After the searches, six people were detained (CrimeaSOS, 2023).

The persecution and therefore, the labelling of Crimean Tatars has intensified due to their involvement in the Noman Çelebicihan Crimean Tatar volunteer battalion. This is a voluntary Crimean Tatar armed formation created in 2016. Noman Çelebicihan was a Crimean

Tatar politician and public figure, executed by the Bolsheviks; the first head of the government of the Crimean People's Republic, the first Mufti of the Muslims of Crimea, Lithuania, Poland, and Belarus (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023). This revered national hero holds significant stature as a public figure and spiritual guide. His legacy is pivotal in fostering community unity, as he advocated for the equality of all ethnic groups residing in Crimea and envisioned a secular, politically enlightened society (Williams, 2016, p. 155). Russian propaganda frequently accuses members of the Noman Çelebicihan battalion of holding extremist beliefs and engaging in the food and energy blockade of Crimea in 2015–2016. Surprisingly, it was not until June 2022, well into the full-scale invasion, that Russia officially labelled the Noman Çelebicihan volunteer battalion, established in 2016, as a terrorist organization. Numerous detainees have reported being subjected to torture and other grave violations to coerce confessions. Consequently, it is highly probable that the majority of those arrested and found guilty of participating in the battalion's activities are innocent. Several detainees have already received severe sentences ranging from 5 to 8.5 years in prison since the war began (Memorial, 2022). The Ukrainian Crimean Human Rights Group has reported that at least 15 people have been incarcerated in Crimea under the pretext of involvement with the Noman Çelebicihan battalion, including Ukrainian citizens abducted by the Russian military in southern Ukraine after 24 February 2022 (Crimean human rights group, 2023). Several of those accused of participation in the battalion are being forced by the Russian side to adopt Russian citizenship and fight against Ukraine (Crimean human rights group, 2023).

Another instance of demonizing Crimean Tatars and labelling them as extremists which involves the manipulation of military units is the Turan Battalion. It is portrayed as a scarecrow which nurtures the “extremist” nature of the Crimean Tatars. It is a volunteer military formation within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, formed from Turkic-speaking ethnic groups from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia. “Turan” is the name of the legendary territory that was inhabited by Iranian-speaking nomadic peoples. According to its leader, Almaz Kudabek, it was created due to ethnic and religious solidarity with the Crimean Tatars (Caucasian Knot, 2022). Turan is formed partly from fighters of other units of the Armed Forces, and partly from those who have not served before, but live on the territory of Ukraine. Muslim religion is a significant factor in this battalion, as its leader assures, that whoever protects the interests of the Kremlin and kills Ukrainians, automatically renounces his religion (Zmina.info, 2022).

Moscow has disproportionately drawn conscripts for the war predominantly from remote and poorer regions of Russia, including those populated by Turkic-speaking ethnic minorities. Consequently, their losses were significantly greater in proportion to the overall number of

other Russian individuals (El Pais, 2022). The implementation of mass conscription has caused numerous Crimean Tatars to flee the peninsula – to “self-deport”. According to the Memorial international human rights organisation, a significant number of them have relocated to Central Asian countries where their ancestors were exiled by the Soviet authorities in 1944, and where they still have relatives or acquaintances. However, some of them are unable to travel using their Ukrainian passports which expired before 2014, and others, mainly young people, have never obtained such documents. Those who managed to leave attempt to obtain or renew their Ukrainian passports at the Ukrainian embassies in the countries that accepted them to facilitate their travel to Europe and prevent their return to the Russian-occupied territory. The mobilization of Crimean Tatars is a gross violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and, under international law, it constitutes a war crime (Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949). It is especially reprehensible since the Crimean Tatars have resisted the occupation since the beginning of the Russian aggression. Now, they are being coerced into fighting against their country, relatives, and fellow citizens (Memorial, 2022). The dynamics of the posts (Figure 1) corroborate the fact that the issue of the conscription of Crimean Tatars is of extreme importance for Russian propaganda – see the “Russian mobilization in Crimea” peak.

The forced deployment of Crimean Tatars to fight against Ukraine and their subsequent displacement from their homeland has altered the demographic makeup of the peninsula, resulting in a higher proportion of inhabitants who are sympathetic to Russia. The promotion of conscription among Crimean Tatars and the message that they should be the first to be drafted from the region highlights Russia’s imperialistic approach toward this ethnic community.

4.2. Negative portrayal suggesting rivalry between Ukraine and Crimean Tatars, marginalizing those Crimean Tatars aligned with Ukraine (35%)

Key messages:

- The government of Ukraine views Crimean Tatars as separatists and political extremists. Ukraine will never extend broad political rights or autonomy to the Crimean Tatars (Krymskaya prachka Telegram channel)
- The Crimean Tatars, who maintain that the southern regions of Ukraine are now part of Russia, advocate for the annexation of these territories into the Russian Crimean federal district (Alternatio.org, RIA Novosti Crimea Telegram channels).

- Crimean Tatars who fight on the Ukrainian side are unskilled and low-morale amateurs, unsuitable for performing important military missions (Svodki Opolchenia Novorossii Telegram channel).
- During the liberation of the peninsula, Ukraine cannot rely on the Crimean Tatars, as they are loyal to Russia and support Putin’s “special military operation” against Ukraine, willingly joining Russian armed forces and volunteer organizations (People live Telegram channel).

Numerous reports (Z operatsyia, WarDonbass, Politnavigator, Daily storm Telegram channels) circulating throughout the Russian segment of social media indicate that the Crimean Tatars are allegedly opposed to the Ukrainian government and wholeheartedly support Putin’s policies, particularly in regard to the ongoing war against Ukraine. Furthermore, anonymous Russian Telegram channels propagate the notion that Crimean Tatars possess an “opportunist mentality,” which results in their failure to protest strongly against the occupying authorities in Crimea. These messages conflict with another propaganda message disseminated by Russia that alleges intelligence and subversive activities carried out by Crimean Tatars in support of the Ukrainian army.

A number of messages in this section contain manipulative statements about the Crimean Platform – Ukraine’s international initiative, aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the worldwide response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea (see Figure 1 at the end of this section). On the eve of the event, one of the key messages was that this project was hopeless and unpopular. However, in 2022, the online Crimean Platform summit was attended by 60 countries and international organizations, and arguments about its insignificance lost their efficacy. Russian propagandists viewed the Crimean Platform’s resolution as legitimizing the “eviction of 1 million Russians from Crimea”, distorting the words of Tamila Tasheva, Presidential Representative of Ukraine in Crimea: “According to Ukrainian law, all Russian Federation citizens who unlawfully entered the peninsula must leave. Subsequently, they can apply for a residence permit if they wish to return to Crimea” (Ukraina.ru Telegram channel). Moreover, they claimed that the Platform did not represent the interests of the indigenous people, as the “real Crimean Tatars” living on the annexed peninsula were not invited to participate. Russia declined to take part, describing the format of the Crimean Platform as “an attempt to solicit additional funding for Crimean Tatar extremists” (Karaulny Telegram channel (1)).

However, Russian propaganda is not true. Ukraine does not differentiate Crimean Tatars into “real” or “fake”, as Russian propaganda claims (Karaulny Telegram channel (1), and recognizes the Mejlis as the only supreme authorized representative executive body of the Crimean Tatar people. Under occupation, the Crimean Tatars face constraints in openly expressing their stance. The leaders of the Mejlis have relocated to mainland Ukraine, yet there are indications that they still hold sway over all Tatars, including those residing in Crimea. Therefore, Mejlis representatives participated in the Crimean Platform meetings and represented the interests of the indigenous people of the peninsula, making the Russian propaganda’s claims that Crimean Tatars were “not fully” represented seem irrational.

Russian social media platforms have propagated a message claiming that Ukraine’s security services send agents into Crimean Tatar communities to spy on Refat Chubarov, the head of the Mejlis who, due to his active pro-Ukrainian position, was forced to flee the peninsula (Roganda news Telegram channel). Russian social media spread the message that Chubarov was allegedly promoting the creation of autonomy in the Kherson region, and Crimean Tatars were purportedly spreading ideas of autonomy and separatism, thereby undermining Ukrainian sovereignty. These allegations lack any factual basis or evidence.

Russia is trying to push the message that Crimean Tatars allegedly do not want to live under Ukrainian rule. However, the Russian propagandistic message about Crimean Tatars’ willingness to live under the Kremlin’s rule and demonstrating the will to incorporate more Ukrainian territories, inhabited by their co-nationals, sounds controversial. Since the Russian occupation in 2014, around 30,000 Crimean Tatars have fled to mainland Ukraine because staying in the Russian-controlled territories would pose a threat to the security of themselves and their families. Many of them have settled in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, parts of which are now occupied and suffer from Russian shelling (Ukrinform, 2022). With the start of the active phase of the war and the occupation of the Kherson region (where many Crimean Tatar settlements are located), the persecution of the Crimean Tatars outside Crimea began.

4.3 Manipulating cultural and historical issues (22%)

Key messages:

- The history of Russia has always been closely linked with that of Crimea, and the culture of Crimea is a part of Russian culture. Russians and Crimean Tatars have been strong military allies and have no other choice but to live together as one nation.

- In 1944, the Crimean Tatars were not deported but rather “relocated” from one southern region of the Soviet Union to another one (Russia live news Telegram channel)
- The transfer of Crimea to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954 was just Russia giving up its historical lands (Nikolai Starikov Telegram channel).
- Russia’s present-day cultural policy in Crimea follows a “salad bowl” model, while Ukraine created the unfavourable conditions of a melting pot (CHVK Media Telegram channel).

This section is rather aimed at fuelling the imperialist worldview that all the territories which used to be under Russian rule (even hundreds of years ago) should be under Moscow’s rule again. Russia endeavours to integrate Crimea into its historical narrative by asserting that the history of Russia has consistently intertwined with that of Crimea, highlighting historical events to support its claim such as the 18th-century annexation of Crimea by Catherine II.

The Soviet narrative regarding the deportation of the Crimean Tatars has been further developed by Russian propaganda, trying to erase the collective memory of those tragic events. Crimean Tatars are depicted as an ethnic minority who were deported to Central Asia as a people "accused of collaborating with the Nazis" (VICE News, 2014), with not a word said that these accusations were trumped up (Readov Chat Telegram channel). However, there is fake news about the further "care" that the Soviet authorities gave to the deported people. It said that in Central Asia, the local authorities made every effort to improve the deportees’ food and lifestyle, thus creating a false impression that the Soviet authorities treated the Crimean Tatars with even-handed condescension: they collaborated with the Nazis, for which they were resettled, but they were helped in every possible way to settle in a new place (Snigyr, 2022).

By providing a sense of continuity and connection to the past, the collective memory about the deportation of 1944 acts as a social glue that binds the nation together, fostering a shared sense of belonging and purpose. Russia imposed a ban on traditional meetings on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Crimean Tatar Genocide, which is commemorated on 18 May.

A particularly noteworthy aspect is the explanation of the Soviet Union’s move to transfer control of Crimea to Soviet Ukraine. This decision is characterized as an “ill-conceived choice” and attributed to Nikita Khrushchev’s “personal initiative.” It is claimed that Crimea was handed over to Ukraine without including Sevastopol, deeming the city outside the scope of the Crimean region. Furthermore, it is stressed that such a step contradicted Soviet legislation and that the opinions of the Crimeans were never sought. While this may not have

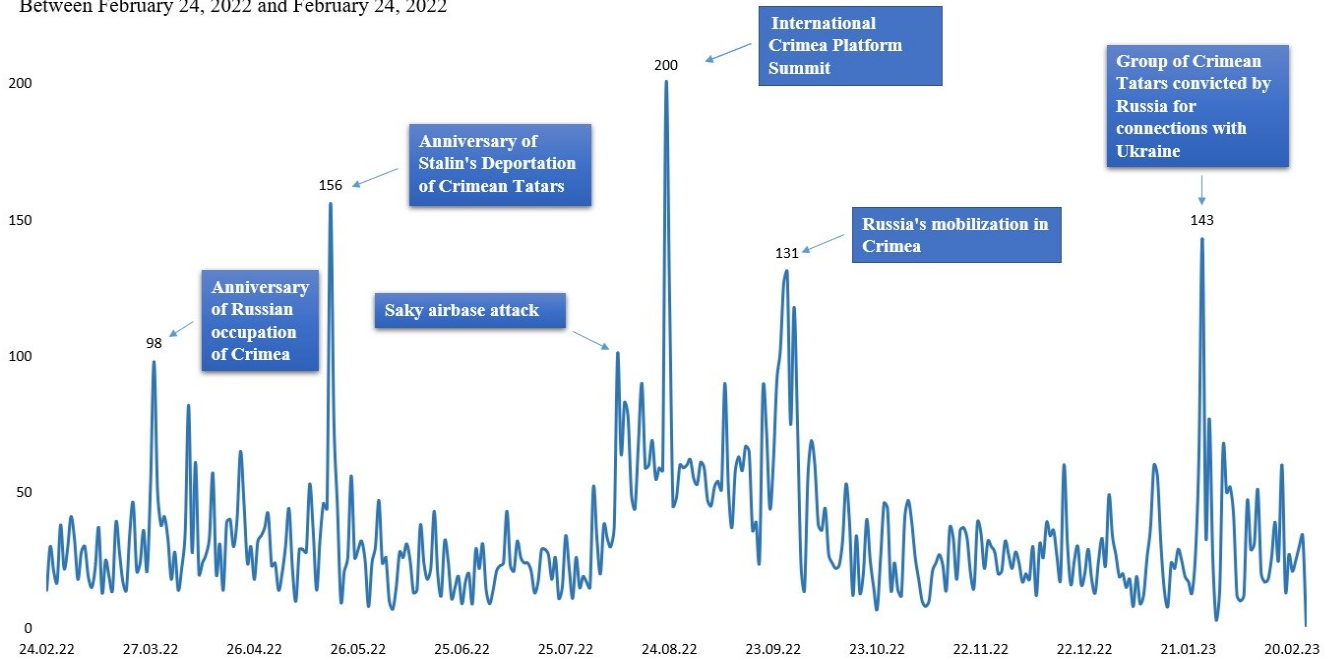
been a significant issue within the framework of a unified state, the collapse of the USSR drastically altered the landscape. As a result, in 2014, Russia asserted it was “reestablishing historical justice” (Kremlin.ru, 2021).

This section also contains a number of messages alleging Crimean Tatars of trying to push an “alternative position”, including about the past, through their “clandestine media” which is financed by George Soros, an iconic person for anti-Western propaganda and one of the “pillars” of the “external governance” narrative. Closing opposition media is part of Russia’s oppressive policy on purging the informational field. After 2014, Russians took down the ATR and Lâle television channels, the latter being a children’s channel that belonged to Lenur Islyamov, a Crimean Tatar businessman.

Another major message of this category is that Russia provides cultural opportunities and democracy in annexed Crimea, while Ukraine provides only “illiberty and oppression”. Russian propaganda often spreads the message that Ukraine did not give Crimean Tatars as much freedom as Russia has. One of the most common arguments is that allegedly Russia ensures the functioning of three languages on the peninsula: Russian, Crimean Tatar, and Ukrainian. In fact, İlmi Ümerov, deputy head of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, says that there are practically no Crimean Tatar schools left in Crimea because “classes are taught in Russian, and the Crimean Tatar language is taught as a subject” (Suspilne, 2022). As of 2021, out of 218,974 children that received education in Crimea, about 31,000 schoolchildren study the Crimean Tatar language as a school subject and only 6,700 children are learning it (Mission of the President of Ukraine in Crimea, 2021). This is concerning considering that the 2014 Russian census records 232,340 Crimean Tatars residing in Crimea (Anti-Discrimination Center, 2022). In addition, the occupying authorities demonstrate a neglectful stance toward the cultural heritage and historical landmarks of the Crimean Tatars. An example of such disregard is the proposal to establish a leisure space in Bakhchisaray which would encroach upon the ancient Muslim burial ground of Sauskan, despite strong opposition to such plans (Memorial, 2022).

Figure 1

Dynamics of messages about Crimean Tatars
Between February 24, 2022 and February 24, 2023



The line graph illustrates the fluctuations in mentions of the Crimean Tatars within the Russian segment of social media. The vertical axis denotes the number of references (posts) to the Crimean Tatars, while the horizontal axis represents time intervals. The graph highlights six significant peaks, indicating periods of notably high mentions of Crimean Tatars compared to other monitoring periods. These peaks coincide with historical dates and symbolic events, such as the anniversary of the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula (March 2022), Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 (May 2022), and the convening of the Crimean Platform Summit (August 2022). Additionally, they correspond to current events, including the explosions at the Saky airbase (August 2022), the partial mobilization in Russia (September 2022), and the trial of a group of Crimean Tatars (January 2023). For instance, the explosions at the Saky airbase triggered an influx of discussions in local Crimean online communities, with users searching for individuals linked to Ukrainian special services and often attributing blame to the Crimean Tatars, reinforcing stereotypes of their involvement in anti-government activities. Similarly, the decision on partial mobilization in Russia sparked discussions concerning the Crimean Tatars' attempts to evade conscription, their characteristic "waiting" behaviour, and alleged pro-Ukrainian underground activities. Another peak in January 2023 was related to the sentencing of five Crimean Tatars involved in the "second Simferopol group

Hizb ut-Tahrir” case, where each of them was sentenced to 13 years in maximum security penal colony by the Southern District Court of the Russian Federation.

Conclusions

Over the course of Russia’s prolonged period of colonization, the Crimean Tatars have been treated as a minority within their native land, casting them as outsiders and internal adversaries on the peninsula. To ideologically rationalize the de-Tatarization and the Russification of the peninsula, propaganda efforts have fostered a disparaging portrayal of the Crimean Tatars. This ranges from characterizing them as marauding people who pillaged neighbouring Slavic territories to unfounded allegations of collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War. Present-day Russia continues to uphold this ideological agenda. It overlays the stereotypes and clichés of tsarist, Soviet, and neo-imperial accusations with new ones provoked by the ongoing war.

Simultaneously, Russia presents itself as a multicultural nation, extolling the rights and nurturing the diversity of its smaller ethnic communities. Manipulative messages assert that the occupying power is creating favourable conditions for the cultural advancement of the Crimean Tatars on the peninsula. However, empirical evidence contradicts it, revealing a fundamentally divergent approach in practice. Concurrently, there are allegations that Ukraine exhibits limited concern for the Tatars, deeming them potential separatists, and it would be unlikely to grant them comprehensive political rights as a collective. Intelligence agencies are allegedly purported to closely monitor their political leaders. Russia, in contrast, is depicted as a nation executing a balanced and advantageous national policy. Yet, Crimean Tatars are far less inclined to engage with their native language than during the period of Ukrainian influence, and their cultural centres face closure. These circumstances serve to underscore that Russia is actively endeavouring to assimilate the Crimean Tatars under the guise of promoting interethnic harmony, mirroring the fate experienced by numerous smaller ethnic groups in Russia.

A distinct cluster of messages pertains to manipulative assertions that all Crimean Tatars residing on the peninsula unanimously endorse Russia and Putin’s aggressive policies vis-à-vis Ukraine. By emphasizing the pro-Russian stance of the Crimean Tatars, Russian propaganda seems to give a “desirable” picture, imposing role models and behavioural patterns which the occupational authorities expect to have from the Crimean Tatars. In addition, Russian propaganda is also trying to downplay the role of the Crimean Tatars in the previous phases of Ukraine’s resistance, as well as to undermine the belief in its future success, arguing against

Ukraine's dependence on the Crimean Tatar underground for assistance in the peninsula's liberation, which only corroborates that their role might be significant and that the Russian side is trying to avoid this scenario.

Crimean Tatars are being disproportionately drafted into the Russian Army, indicating a deliberate targeting of indigenous peoples. The presence of national minorities, including the Crimean Tatars, is notably over-represented among Russian troops in Ukraine, signifying their role as the forefront of Russian colonial expansion. Russia's aim is to assimilate them into a subaltern status — a nation devoid of its own distinct identity, history, and prospects.

For the Crimean Tatars, this war represents far more than a fight for Ukraine's territorial integrity, justice, and peace. It stands as a pivotal juncture for their very survival and identity as a nation. Therefore, Russian propaganda is trying to discredit this struggle and undermine Ukraine's informational counteroffensive, as well as the role of the Crimean Tatars in it.

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