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Rethinking the State, Minorities, and National Security

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The topic of ethnic relations continues to attract students of East European and post-Soviet politics and fuel lively academic debates. Ethnic conflict, on which these discussions typically focus, may indeed be the most visible, and perhaps the most 'colourful' of problems facing the region. However, not enough attention in this debate has been devoted to the general context in which national tensions arise in the post-Soviet political space and, in particular, to the nature of the post-Soviet state.

Will Kymlicka's theoretical propositions are based on the premise that these post-Soviet states function in the same way other European states do, that is, they have the political will to solve problems resulting from their ethnocultural diversity; there exists some kind of national 'majority' which defines the state's policy toward national 'minority'; and the state has a vision of what this policy should or should not be, and makes the appropriate decisions to meet these objectives. In my view, this assumption, which the author never fully articulates, is unwarranted. To substantiate this claim, I examine the nature of the state, national security, and the identification of a national minority in the post-Soviet context, and then look at the specific example of the Crimean Tatars.

The Existence of the State

Before addressing the question of minority policy in the former USSR, one should examine the power structure in post-Soviet successor states by asking a few basic questions. If political entities which

emerged from the ruins of the USSR are real states, in whose name are they governed? Where are their power centres located and who is responsible for the decision-making process? One does not have to be a learned Sovietologist to see that most post-Soviet states are controlled by organized crime groups who have succeeded in privatizing national economies, and whose direct interest in governance rarely goes beyond the taxation system and foreign trade. At best, decisions in these states are made by the executive power. More frequently, however, the actual decision-makers are large economic organizations linked to oil and weapons trade, while the role of parliaments is reduced to that of discussion clubs. Ruling élites show little interest in other aspects of social life such as education, health care, and minority issues unless minorities are seen as a security threat. Due to a passivity learned under the Communist system, the public at large does not object to this state of affairs.

Even if some elements of state policy toward national minorities are defined, rarely is there one single power centre responsible for its implementation. Sometimes, as in the case of Russia's policy in the North Caucasus, there are several power centres enforcing diametrically opposed policies. Due to the limited and selective interest of the ruling élites in the affairs of the state, in several areas of state activity no policy decisions are being made let alone implemented. Take the example of education. To assess the shape of minority education one should see how the educational needs of the 'majority' are met by the state. In the countries of the former Soviet Union the state is in the process of winding down its activities in the field of education. No financing for the state-owned institutions of higher learning is available, so steep tuition fees are being introduced on a massive scale. Primary schools do not receive funding for the maintenance of school buildings or the supply of teaching material. Teachers go unpaid for months and no new textbooks are published. If the state fails to address the most elementary needs of education in the state language, one can hardly expect it to successfully run an educational system for minority groups or even bother to work out a concept of minority education.

The governments of the successor states to the USSR do not regulate social life, do not collect taxes, and do not fight crime. Social change occurs spontaneously. In all the new post-Soviet states minority groups strengthen their positions. It is clear that their rising aspirations and escalation of demands cannot be stopped because the state is too weak to control the process. In any case, the return to a model in which minorities were unconditionally subordinated to

majorities appears unlikely. Therefore the multination model becomes more realistic—but we should not misunderstand the nature of this change. It occurs spontaneously as a result of weakness, and not as a result of any consciously planned activities of the state apparatus.

The weakness of the post-Soviet state cannot be explained entirely through the difficulties of transition to a market economy, the psychological resistance of the élites to change, and its inability to make political decisions. This weakness also results from a lack of vision about the direction in which the state should be moving: toward European integration, market economy, and NATO, or toward integration with Russia and a return to Communism? Ukraine offers a good example of a state at the crossroads. Pro-Russian and pro-Communist forces are not sufficiently strong to impose their vision of Ukrainian statehood that would block reforms necessary to move Ukraine in the alternative direction. 'Pro-Russian Communists' and their 'democratic' opponents take diametrically opposed positions on national minorities issues. Pro-Russian Communists, who see the German, Polish, Jewish, and Tatar minorities in Ukraine as allies of Western capitalism and a potential security threat, are determined to prevent any strengthening of their position. Their Communist worldview has no understanding of, and is fundamentally hostile to, diversity. On the other hand, the democratic and pro-Western camp is free of minority bias and seeks to solve minority issues in a civilized fashion. However, it is too weak to translate them into an official policy of the state.

National Security Issues

Theories of multiculturalism proposed by Western scholars are based on the experience of Western European and American societies, which for at least a couple of decades have enjoyed stable democracy. National minorities of Western Europe share with other nations of the region a number of common values. They include the convictions that: (1) law constitutes the basis of social life; (2) a multi-party system and parliamentary democracy constitute a superior way of political participation to the mono-party and Communist system; (3) the market economy is superior to the planned economy as the basis for economic development; and (4) NATO represents a more reliable ally in security matters than, say, Iran and Libya. Such understandings are

universally shared by the citizens of those Central and East European countries recently admitted to NATO membership—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—including national minorities residing on their territories.

Even if the most radical wishes of national minorities were realized, such as the emergence of a Basque state, an independent Corsica, or the break-up of Belgium along national lines, this would not pose a serious threat to European security, and the new states would not rush to conclude military alliances with Russia, Iran, or China. In Western Europe, national minority issues concern culture, education, political representation, and social equality. They are not issues of special interest to military intelligence.

It would be naïve, however, to apply some of these generalizations to minority problems in the former USSR. Minorities in post-Soviet states often assume diametrically opposed geopolitical positions to the majorities. For example, the Armenian minority in Georgia actively seeks Russia's political support and opposes the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Georgia. In Ukraine, the Russian national minority in Crimea supports Communism—that is a system incompatible with parliamentary democracy. In the parliamentary elections conducted in April 1988 in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the ethnic Russian vote allowed the Communists to capture as much as 40 per cent of the seats—much more than in other parts of Ukraine. An overwhelming majority of Crimea's Russian population supports the idea of the re-annexation of Crimea by Russia and opposes integration with the West, as sought by independent Ukraine. Also in Crimea, the Crimean Tatars, who do not have a single representative in the parliament of the Autonomous Republic display a strong anti-Communist bias, want Ukraine to join NATO, and actively support integration with the West and Turkey.

Over the last few years Russia has consistently tried to undermine the new independent states by fostering minority separatism and arming separatist forces. In such a way, some of the movements for greater minority autonomy degenerated into regular wars of secession that claimed thousands of victims. Such was the case in the bloody confrontation between the Abkhaz and the Georgians, in which the Abkhaz nation of fewer than 100,000 people defeated the regular army of the Georgian state, whose population is 5 million. With Russian military assistance, the Abkhaz separatists succeeded in detaching from Georgia a vast chunk of territory. Likewise, the

200,000-strong Armenian community in Nagorno-Karabakh, which initially called for cultural autonomy within Azerbaijan, within a couple of years had defeated the regular army of Azerbaijan (population 7 million) and claimed one-fifth of its territory. Both Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh remain to this day under the control of armed military formations that prevent the return of refugees or a form of international control.

The two examples of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrate that the question of national minorities in the former USSR is much more directly tied to national security concerns than is the case in Western Europe or Canada. The security of nations of the Caucasus and Crimea can only be guaranteed if Russia refrains from exploiting minority issues in the region, and accepts 'western' standards of political conduct.

Who Is a 'National Minority'?

Terminological questions—who is and who is not a nation or a national minority—in the rapidly changing political conditions of the former USSR acquire a political dimension. Everyone familiar with central and eastern Ukraine is aware of the fact that the border between Russians and Ukrainians is fluid—regardless of how this border is defined by political élites in Russia and Ukraine. The region is inhabited by millions of people who cannot clearly answer the question of who they are: Russian or Ukrainian. The question itself strikes them as absurd. They know from school the standards of literary Russian and in everyday life use Russian, albeit with a 'southern accent' and borrowings from Ukrainian. To call these people 'Russians', and to claim that Ukraine is 'home to a many-million-strong Russian minority', amounts to a political declaration.

In the last couple of years one can observe the growing acceptance of the idea of Ukrainian statehood among these 'Russians', a concept they originally found awkward and hard to comprehend. Recent developments—such as the war in Chechnya—which claimed the lives of many Russian conscripts, and the economic chaos in Russia—seem to have further weakened the Russian ethnic identity of this population. It may therefore be more precise to describe this group as 'Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine' rather than 'Russians'. On the other hand, the Russian population of Crimea is distinctly Russian in terms of its ethnic and political identity, and can legitimately be called a Russian national minority in Ukraine.

Choosing a Model for the Crimean Tatars

Will Kymlicka questions the appropriateness of the Crimean Tatars' self-definition as an 'indigenous nation'. Let me briefly explain how the Crimean Tatars themselves understand this label. They regard Crimea as their only homeland to which they have rightfully returned after several decades of forced exile, and from which they now have no intention of leaving.[1] In this respect, their situation in Ukraine differs significantly from that of Poles, Germans, Russians, Armenians, Romanians, and other national groups that have their states (ethnic homelands) outside Ukraine's borders. Kin-states can to some extent meet the social and cultural needs of these minorities, and offer them refuge in an emergency—as currently is the case for Poles, Germans, Czechs, and Russians repatriated from Central Asia or the Caucasus.

Crimean Tatars see themselves as a nation, not an 'ethnic group' or a 'national minority'.[2] Much of the confusion regarding their status in Crimea comes from the term 'Tatar', which has been used historically by Russians to refer to all Muslims regardless of their ethnic origins and geographic roots, be it the Caucasus, the Urals, or the Volga valley. For example, the Turkic-speaking population of Azerbaijan was traditionally referred to as the 'Caucasian Tatars'. Turkophone Muslims of Crimea, on the other hand, describe themselves as *Kyrymyly*, best translated simply as 'Crimeans'. The term 'Crimean Tatars', applied to them by others, may be misleading as it implies that the Muslim inhabitants of Crimea are not a separate nation but part of a large and vaguely defined Tatar 'ethnos', at home somewhere in the steppes of Asia. Therefore, many Russians still see the Crimean Tatars as immigrants from Asia rather than rightful citizens of Crimea. Soviet authorities did their best to preserve and reinforce the negative stereotype of 'Tatars' in the minds of the Slavs who moved to Crimea in the 1960s and 1970s, and who today represent a large majority of the peninsula's population. Many of them continue to hold the view that the deportation of the Crimean Tatars was an act of historical justice and that the Tatars should have stayed in Central Asia. It is precisely in order to counter the stereotype of 'savages from Asia' and to emphasize their ties to the Crimean soil that the Crimean Tatars insist on being an 'indigenous nation' of the peninsula.

Crimean Tatars have a 600-year old tradition of statehood in Crimea—the Crimean Khanate—in addition to rich literary, architectural, and musical traditions. Moreover, they have a tradition of conducting their own state policy, which included military and

diplomatic relations with other European nations. Conquered in the late eighteenth century and absorbed into the Russian empire, the Crimean Tatar state was revived after 1917 as an autonomous Soviet republic. The Crimean ASSR became the first Muslim country to grant all citizens, including women, full voting rights. The republic was eventually abolished by the Bolsheviks who moved to destroy finally the Crimean Tatar nation by deporting the entire population to Central Asia in 1944.[3]

In the 1960s and 1970s the Crimean Tatars created in the places of their resettlement the largest civil rights movement in the former USSR. Thousands of Crimean Tatars signed letters of protest to Khrushchev and organized demonstrations to demand the right to return to their Crimean homeland.[4] Their massive return to Crimea in the late 1980s was superbly organized.[5] A self-governing body, the majlis, was established in every Tatar settlement. The majlis system functions at three levels: village majlises elect regional majlises, which in turn elect their delegates to Kurultay, the national assembly. Milli Majlis, the highest representative organ of the Crimean Tatars is elected by the Kurultay. Unfortunately, Ukrainian authorities do not recognize this efficient and well-run system of self-government. The majlis system, in fact, is a state-like organism without the actual political power of a state. Crimean Tatars have no state of their own and their self-government functions within the *de facto* purely Russian political environment of the Crimean Autonomous Republic.

In direct conflict with the Russian administration of Crimea and in compliance with Ukrainian laws, but without any outside support, Crimean Tatars are currently building their system of national education. It is noteworthy that the Majlis enjoys great respect among the Crimean Tatar population. There are still individuals who, under very harsh economic and sociopolitical conditions, are willing to assume the responsibility for the well-being of the Crimean Tatar community. It is also interesting that many local Russians indirectly recognize the legality of the Majlis by turning to it—rather than to local police—in the case of conflicts with the Tatar population.

Crimean Tatars, who number 260,000 and make up 12 per cent of the peninsula's population, have no representation in the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. However, they have two seats in the Ukrainian parliament in Kiev. They are incomparably more active, socially and politically, than the Slavic population of

Crimea. They demand supplementary elections to compete for seats in the Crimean parliament, recognition of the Majlis, and settlement of the citizenship problem by Ukraine.

That these legitimate demands of the Crimean Tatars have not been met in independent Ukraine is explained by the weakness of the Ukrainian state and the resulting inability to develop and implement a consistent minority policy.[6] This situation is further reinforced by the political deadlock in which pro-Western democrats and anti-Western Communists, with their respective visions of Ukraine's future, effectively neutralize each other. Hostile to the Tatars, the Communists oppose their political demands. Against this, the Tatars have consistently voiced distinctly anti-Communist views, and supported independent Ukraine, within its current borders, and its pro-democratic camp.[7] In the last parliamentary elections, Mustafa Dzimilev and Refat Chubarov, the only Crimean Tatar members of the Ukrainian parliament, ran as candidates of the Rukh movement. In the media, Crimean Tatar leaders have consistently articulated a vision of a modern and capitalist Ukraine, allied with Western Europe and Turkey. This defines the position of the Crimean Tatars in the political landscape of independent Ukraine. In Crimea, they represent the only pro-democratic political force. Although cornered and isolated, they are by far the most effective and best organized political group in regional politics. This makes them a convenient target of attacks by the anti-Western and pro-Communist majority in Crimea—and provides one more reason why they need protection.

In the long run, I believe the Crimean Tatar question would be best solved by a model of the two-nation state, despite the huge disproportion in the populations of the Ukrainian (60 million) and Crimean Tatar nations. In the last few years the Tatars have demonstrated their capacity to establish and maintain a political system based on democratic representation. Their interests are strongly tied to Crimea and not to those of any other state. The establishment of a Crimean Tatar Autonomous Republic in Ukraine would, of course, require that the interests of other minorities residing in Crimea are taken into consideration. The model of 'two nations in one state' would pose no security threat to Ukraine, which is home to many other national minorities. For the Crimean Tatars, it would offer generous compensation for their historical misfortunes, adequate to their political aspirations and capacity for effective self-government.

NOTES

1. Deklaratsia o natsional'nom suverenitete krymskotatarskogo naroda, *Dokumenty kurultaya krymskotatarskogo naroda 1991–1998*, Simferopol 1999.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Tatars of Crimea. Return to Homeland*, Edward A. Allworth (ed.) London 1988, 180.
4. 'Krymskie Tatary v *Khronike Tekushchikh Sobytii*,' *Crimean Studies*, 5–6, September–November 2000, Kyiv; Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, Stanford 1987, 165–201.
5. Urszula Doroszewska, 'Crimea—whose country?' *Uncaptive Minds*, 3, 1992, 39.
6. Alexander Piskun, 'Crimean Tatar People's Integration into Ukrainian Society: Problems of Political-Legal Regulation,' *Crimean Studies*, 1, January 2000, 79.
7. 'We Prefer Ukraine' An Interview with Nadir Bekirov, by Urszula Doroszewska, *Uncaptive Minds*, 2, 1995, 55.