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Russia Referendum Exacerbates Crimea Divisions (Video)

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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A pro-Russia demonstrator displaying the Russian flag in Simferopol.

BAKHCHYSARAI, Ukraine — Many activists in the turmoil-ridden Crimea believe that the peninsula is Russian land and has always been so.

But before Crimea was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1783, it was for centuries the center of Crimean Khanate, which for many years controlled what is now the south of Russia and much of modern Ukraine.

Its capital was Bakhchysarai, today a little town on the way from the seat of Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol to the regional capital Simferopol, where the parliament on Thursday called for President Vladimir Putin to annex Crimea and moved up a referendum asking residents if they want to join Russia.

A pro-Russian rally in Simferopol, the Capital of Crimea, on March 6, 2014.

"This is an illegitimate referendum and an illegitimate government that has nothing to do with the Crimean people," said Geray, a heavily bearded Tatar man standing in front of one of numerous mosques whose minarets pierce the Bachchysarai sky.

"Russia did not do the right thing. It has forged this coup; it was guile," he said.

Geray, who learned about the decision of the Crimean parliament to shift the referendum to March 16 and ask Putin to accept Crimea as the 84th subject of the Russian Federation from The Moscow Times, turned a little paler after hearing the news. He asked what Muslim Tatars should do and also wondered how The Moscow Times has not yet been shut down, since, he says, there is no free speech in Russia.

"Ukraine is a much more democratic country than Russia, that is what we are afraid of," he said.

Geray was afraid to give his last name, citing fear of reprisal from Russians in his town. At the same time, Russians in Bakhchysarai claimed that "the Tatars said they will cut our throats."

It is this atmosphere of mutual animosity and distrust that made Muslim Tatars in the sixth district of Bakhchysarai form patrols to protect their neighborhoods.

A day before, red crosses appeared on some of the Tatar buildings — a sign that Tatars should leave the territory.

Tatars already experienced complete expulsion from Crimea when, under the pretext of alleged cooperation with Nazi forces during World War II, they were forcibly deported to Central Asia and Siberia. Thousands died of starvation there.

Bakchysarai, the ancient capital of Crimean Tartars, filmed on March 6, 2014

Only in 1991 were Tatars allowed to return, with many of them claiming some of the best land plots in the peninsula. Numerous makeshift booths are scattered around major Crimean towns today with the single aim of physically marking the territory.

"These Tatars are just afraid that Russia will seize these territories," said Nadezhda Andreyeva, a Russian citizen who moved to Crimea from Siberia to enjoy its better climate.

The humid Crimean air, already tense with with the weight of expected conflict, became tinged with shock, awe and uncertainty following news that its parliament had asked for Crimea to become part of Russia.

Russians in Bakhchysarai rejoiced.

"We do not want to feed these bandits from the West any longer," said Lyudmila, tour guide at a local museum.

Even some Tatars have followed suit: "We need one president and fifteen republics, just as it used to be," said Dinara Voroshilova, waving her hands and screaming, making reference to the divisions in the Soviet Union.

People in Bakhchysarai's Turkish cafes, some of which do not serve alcohol in accordance with Islamic law, had accepted the news and were already discussed how they will live under the Russian laws, how taxes will be paid and what kind of social benefits they will receive.

"Putin needs a new cheap resort for people, after Sochi has become so expensive," people joked.

"I hope Putin realizes what kind of problems we have and how much responsibility he has to assume," they said.

People at a pro-Russia rally in Simferopol compared their situation with other breakaway states, such as the former Georgian areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and said they were not afraid to enjoy little recognition by the outside world.

"Why was it allowed to Kosovo Albanians and not to us?" Yuri Dobrochikhin, 50, wondered while waving the Russian flag.

He said that as opposed to being part of an unrecognized entity like Abkhazia, "We will become Russian citizens and will be able to travel around the world if we want to," he said.

Most of the people at the rally were middle aged or older with a minority of younger people

"We vote for Russia, but there are diverse opinions among the young," said Liza, 17, and Anton, 22, who are not related but share the surname Kuznetsov.

"We do not want to see in Simferopol what has happened in Kiev," they said.

Overall, passions in Crimea are high. Expressions of feverish joy and gloomy despair provide thin cover for the only emotion that is shared by everyone here — anxiety.

"Russians have their own interests, Americans theirs and nobody thinks of the people," said Geroy, spitting on the ground.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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