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‘Together Forever’: Russian Schoolchildren Mark 11 Years Since Crimea Annexation With Patriotic Activities

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Teenagers hold up Russian flags at the Artek International Children's Camp in annexed Crimea. **Sergei Malgavko / TASS**

A young schoolboy who was born after Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine writes “11 Years Together” on a drawing at his rural school in Siberia.

This drawing is part of a nationwide patriotic campaign called “Colors of Crimea.”

Launched by the pro-government youth organization The Movement of the First, the initiative took place across Russia in the lead-up to March 18, the 11th anniversary of Crimea’s annexation from Ukraine.

It is one of several anniversary activities taking place in Russian schools that aim to indoctrinate schoolchildren with the Kremlin's version of the annexation.

Russia launched a military operation to seize Crimea in February 2014. Armed men without insignia occupied government buildings, military bases and key infrastructure. Only later did President Vladimir Putin acknowledge they were Russian troops.

At the time, Ukraine was in crisis following the political upheaval of the Maidan Revolution and was unable to mount an effective response. On March 16, 2014, a referendum on Crimea's status was held under Russian military supervision.

Pro-Russian authorities claimed that more than 96% of voters supported Crimea's incorporation into Russia. Though the referendum was widely dismissed by Ukraine and the international community, Putin formally signed the annexation two days later.

As part of the "Colors of Crimea" campaign, children were taught about the peninsula's landmarks before drawing iconic sites like the Swallow's Nest fortress. In some cases, they colored the Ukrainian peninsula in the colors of the Russian flag.

In the Moscow region, some children's drawings included slogans such as "Crimea and Russia: Together Forever," "One Country. One People" and "Crimea is Russia." At the end of the lesson, students were photographed in front of their drawings displayed on the classroom chalkboard.

"May the memory of this event inspire us to new achievements and strengthen our unity!" Movement of the First organizers wrote in the republic of Bashkortostan.

Young elementary school students, who may struggle with drawing on their own, color in pre-made illustrations of Crimea's landmarks with the help of their art teachers.

At the Russian Railways Lyceum, younger students were introduced to Crimea through an environmental lens. Eight-year-olds sketched endangered animals native to the peninsula, while first graders in the Ural region were photographed holding handmade heart-shaped cutouts to celebrate Crimea's "reunification" with Russia.

Observers say these activities are an effective way to shape the next generation's worldview to align with the Kremlin's narrative.

"Authorities are laying the groundwork for the future. Young children cannot critically process [the annexation], but when the message comes from a trusted adult, they won't question it. The younger the child, the more effective this approach is," a Russian school psychologist told The Moscow Times, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

For those who did not get a chance to draw Crimean landscapes in class, The Movement of the First launched an online flash mob. Participants were instructed to post their drawings on the social media platform VKontakte using the official hashtags of the youth movement, often compared to the Soviet Young Pioneers.

In late February, the ruling United Russia party launched the "Russian Crimea and

Sevastopol" campaign targeting middle and high school students.

As part of the initiative, high school seniors were instructed to watch a pre-recorded online lesson by Senator Yekaterina Altabaeva, who served as the head of Sevastopol's Legislative Assembly following the annexation of Crimea.

"As early as 1993 [under Ukrainian rule], radical Russophobes started coming to Crimea. They came to impose new 'heroes' like [Stepan] Bandera and force Russians to abandon their native language. There was to be no Russian left — only forced Ukrainization," Altabaeva claimed within the first three minutes of the lesson, repeating widely debunked Kremlin talking points.

She then outlined her version of "Russian Crimea's" history, Ukrainian governance of the peninsula and the mass protests in Kyiv after pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign a cooperation agreement with the EU.

"Nazism became the foundation of a Western-funded coup," Altabaeva claims when describing the 2014 protests in Kyiv.

"The students heard firsthand once again how the people of Sevastopol and Crimea fought for the opportunity to reunite with Russia," a school administration in Labytangi, a town beyond the Arctic Circle, wrote on social media.

After the lesson, students were required to watch one of two films — one about "forced Ukrainization" and another about "the madness of Maidan." They then answered questions about Crimea's modern history.

"Students must understand how strongly our country stands against injustice, fascism and nationalism — and what interests our nation is defending in the course of the special military operation," said State Duma deputy Aydyn Saryglar.

For middle schoolers, United Russia organized drawing and poster competitions featuring Crimea, as well as a storytelling contest titled "The History of Crimea in My Family."

"The most active students" will win a trip to Crimea and Sevastopol, United Russia's General Council Secretary Vladimir Yakushev promised. Winners will receive their travel vouchers in September.

Conversations About Important Things, the propaganda lessons added to Russia's school curriculum following the invasion of Ukraine, have also been instructing students about the annexation ahead of its 11th anniversary.

On Monday, students were taught about "Russian Crimea" and the 100th anniversary of Artek, the former Soviet-era pioneer camp on the peninsula.

For younger students, the annexation was framed as a "return to the native family," while high schoolers were introduced to the lesson with a quote from Putin: "Crimea is infused with our shared history and pride."

During the Conversations About Important Things, students heard from well-known former

Artek attendees including former Prosecutor General Yury Chaika, the subject of a well-known investigation by Alexei Navalny; Central Election Commission chief Ella Pamfilova, who has barred independent candidates from recent presidential elections; and Anatoly Torkunov, rector of the elite Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

In some schools, "advisors on upbringing" — a position introduced after Russia's full-scale invasion — helped "commemorate" the annexation's 11th anniversary.

In the republic of Chuvashia, children played a game called "Conversations About Crimea," where they guessed legends about the peninsula before taking a "virtual tour" using online maps.

In Vorkuta, a city beyond the Arctic Circle, advisors on upbringing organized a video call titled "Together Forever" between local students and children from Crimea.

"This teleconference was more than just a meeting — it marked the beginning of new friendships between Vorkuta, Crimea, Sevastopol and Novorossiysk," the local Education Ministry wrote on social media.

In the 11 years since Crimea's annexation, an entire generation of Russians has grown up only knowing the peninsula as part of their country — not Ukraine.

"When *perestroika* happened, my worldview shifted overnight. Suddenly, people around me were openly discussing the cult of personality, and in history class, we brought newspaper clippings because our textbooks were already outdated," the anonymous school psychologist recalled to The Moscow Times of their teenage years.

"As teenagers, our minds were flexible — we embraced it all with enthusiasm and a desire to rethink everything," they said. "I believe one day, the same will happen again."

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