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BORDER STUDIES

Local Responses to the Contested Border in Northern Crimea

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Abstract—This article analyses the situation in Crimea, which de facto seceded from Ukraine and joined Russia in 2014 following a local referendum, the results of which are not recognised by the international community. It focuses on the everyday life of the local population, which has been forced to adapt to the emergence of the contested border between Russia and Ukraine; the related breakdown of political and economic interactions between Crimea and Ukraine; and the region's transition to new geopolitical, economic, and legal conditions. Based on field research, expert interviews, and six focus groups in two small border cities of Northern Crimea, we specifically address the meaning of the de facto border for local residents. By considering perceptions of Ukraine and its regional neighbours, cross-border practices, and social relations, we discuss how people assess these changes and view the border. Our research, firstly, shows that residents of Northern Crimea attach great importance to the protective function of the new border. Echoing mainstream Russian media, they portray Ukraine as a hostile state that threatens Crimeans. Secondly, the residents claim that the emergence of the border has given people hope for improved living standards and well-being. Despite the still-ambiguous balance of costs and benefits in border cities, the local residents are overwhelmingly pro-Russian and expect Russia's support in the future. Thirdly, for Crimean residents, the border has also become a significant obstacle to communication with those in Ukraine. Neighbours across the border are not yet perceived as "other." In this sense, Crimean residents do not accept the border and would like to see Crimea and Ukraine once again united.

Keywords: border, social representations, mobility, non-recognition, Northern Crimea, Ukraine, Russia

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INTRODUCTION: BORDERS AND AMBIVALENT IDENTITIES

In recent years, numerous studies have suggested that borders are not fixed lines because they are constituted and manifested in multiple processes of "bordering," "ordering," and "othering" (Brambilla, 2015; Paasi, 2020; van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002). Borders form sets of flexible boundaries, which are associated not only with the exercise of state power, territorial control, and structuring, but also with social practices, identity, and representations (Border ..., 2020). As products of a controversial historical past (in the sense of the demarcation and delimitation of state territories), political borders often do not coincide with imaginary and cultural boundaries; for that reason, they continue to be contested at one level or another. Drawing attention to the significance of this element of nation-state building, Anssi Paasi aptly notes that "borders are often pools of emotions, fears and memories that can be mobilized apace for both progressive and regressive purposes" (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 62).

Border regions are the places where differences and divisions between state territories and societies often arise, and where significant impacts on the daily life of the local population become visible (van der Velde and Spierings, 2008). On the one hand, territorial and socio-cultural differences between neighbouring countries, as well as social and economic inequalities, stimulate the development of cross-border mobility and interactions that allow residents of border areas to cultivate and expand social contacts and knowledge about "others" (Balogh, 2013; Rippl et al., 2009; Szytniewski and Spierings, 2014; van Houtum, 1999; van der Velde and Spierings, 2008). On the other hand, residents of border regions have the opportunity to compare life "here" to "there" and to experience different feelings towards not only the neighbouring state but also their own—whether feelings of arrogance, condescension, inferiority, or rejection (Meinhof, 2003; Schack, 2001). Such feelings affect a person's identity and sense of belonging to a country. In particular, negative feelings, such as a feeling of marginality, grow as a result of the peripheralization of border

regions. Although top-down policy seems to be quite effective at defining "others" and establishing separation from neighbouring states, in borderlands, due to cross-border practices and networking, local people often develop their own understanding of what is normal and abnormal, and their own ideas about "others." By establishing informal rules of behaviour and relationships with neighbours, border residents shape common perceptions, spatial images, and categories that help them cope with asymmetry and build up social cohesion across the borders.

For these reasons, among others, borders are volatile and contested. This is especially true in cases of migration or shifting borders, which were common in the past but are less so nowadays. The re-establishment of borders by states and societies arguably bears similarities to the process of producing and reproducing spatial and other separations during international migration. Van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) note that some people who change their country of residence retain their original identity for a long time, while others rather quickly adapt to a new social environment and legal conditions by restructuring personal systems of meaning and reference points.

The observed processes of constant reinvention and self-redefinition by people who cross national borders pose a number of questions for scholars: What happens when the customary order breaks down because of the "migration" of political borders, as opposed to the migration of individual people? How do people assess the changes that have occurred? How do they perceive their former neighbours? This article examines the situation in Crimea, the region that de facto seceded from Ukraine in the spring of 2014, following a local referendum.[1] According to official Russian data, 83.1% of residents over 18 years of age voted in the referendum, and almost 97% of them supported the idea of Crimea joining Russia.[2] However, the international community does not recognise this outcome, drawing attention to illegitimate actions by Russia related to military intervention, incitement, and anti-Ukrainian propaganda on the peninsula. By focusing on public opinion and the everyday life of the inhabitants of two border cities, we discuss how the border displacement and social representations are interrelated and what the contested border means for local residents today.

First, we provide regional context and background, including the relationship between Crimea and Ukraine before 2014. We then describe our research methods and the places where the research was conducted. Finally, we analyse three interrelated issues: (1) people's attitudes towards Ukraine, current fears, and desired political projects for the future; (2) how people assess the new border in terms of costs and benefits; and (3) the effect on living standards and everyday life.

THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA AND DISCOURSE ABOUT REGIONAL IDENTITY

Crimea is located on the northern coast of the Black Sea and on the western coast of the Sea of Azov. Almost an island, it is connected to the continent by the Isthmus of Perekop, a strip of land about 5 to 7 km wide. The eastern tip of the Crimean Peninsula is separated from the Taman Peninsula on the Russian mainland by the Kerch Strait, which connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. From a geographical perspective, the peninsula can be divided into several zones, which differ in physical characteristics, settlement features, and economic development. The southern part (which Crimeans call *YuBK*) is the most densely populated and includes many resort cities and towns (Fig. 1). The rest of Crimea, with the exception of mountainous areas, is part of the steppe zone and specialises in agriculture and industry.

Historically, Crimea has been part of three of the world's largest empires (the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Russian empires). As a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1768–1774), Crimea joined the Russian Empire, and after 1917, it became an autonomous republic within the RSFSR in the USSR. This political status was supposed to take into account the interests of its indigenous and predominantly Muslim minority of Crimean Tatars. However, during World War II, Crimean Tatars, along with some other ethnic minorities, were forcibly displaced to Central Asia on charges of treason and Nazi collaboration. The deportation of the Crimean Tatars resulted in the downgrading of Crimea to an ordinary region (oblast) immediately after the war. In the post-war period, due to a fourfold decrease in the population (a result of the displacement and military losses), the region was actively populated by the rural population from central regions of Russia and Ukraine. On the eve of and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimean Tatars began to return en masse to the region (by 2001, they made up 12.1% of the population), which sparked the emergence of interethnic disagreement and friction in local society.

In 1954, the peninsula was transferred by the central authorities to the Ukrainian SSR, "considering the common economy, territorial proximity, and close economic ties (water and electricity supply) between

[1] The corresponding amendment was made to the current Constitution of the Russian Federation of December 12, 1993 after its approval during the All-Russian vote on July 1, 2020.

[2] These statistics were posted to the website of Krymskie izvestiia on March 18, 2014 [Ukrainian language only]: http://crimiz.ru/index.php/2014-04-03-07-29-46/13848–16-2014-.

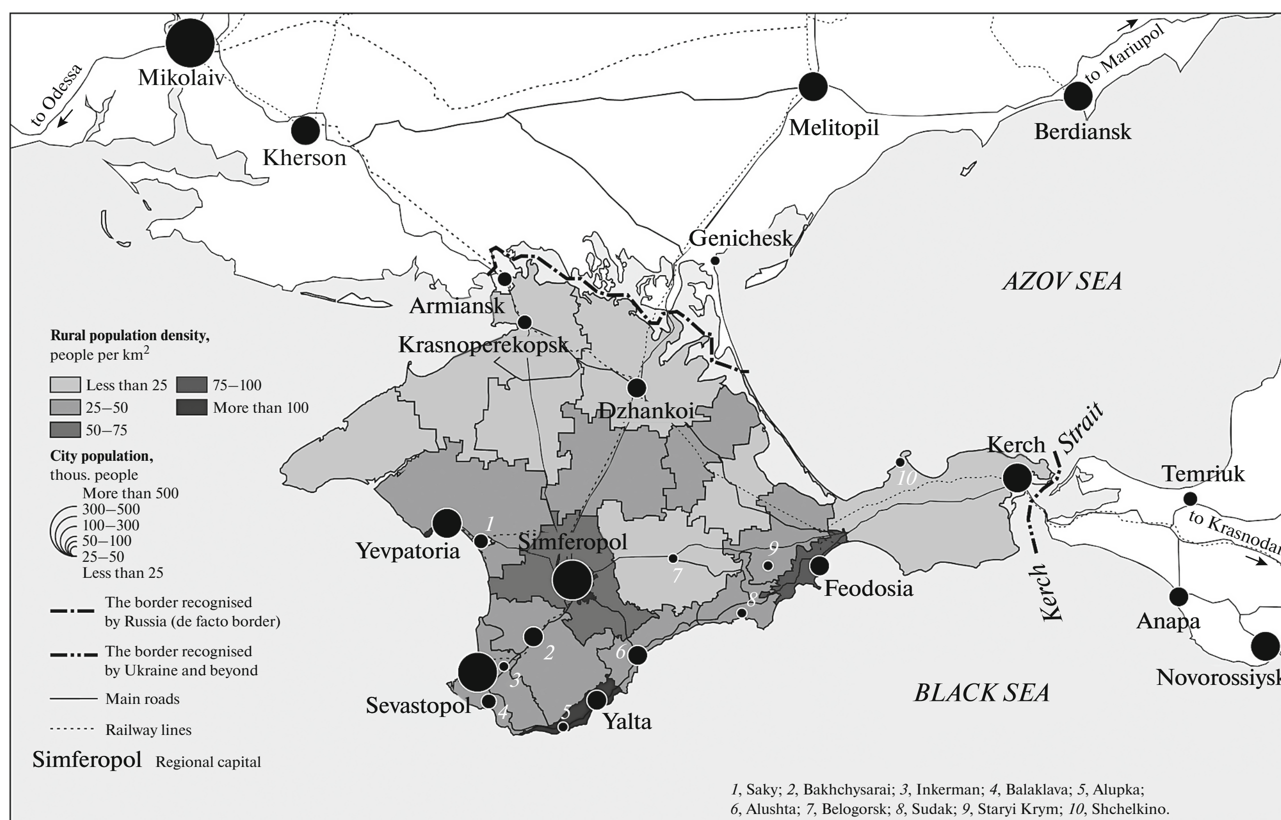

Fig. 1. Crimea: Territorial distribution of the population.
Source: Authors, based on data from the Statistics Service of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (2019).

the Crimean region and the Ukrainian SSR”.[3] Many members of the Soviet intelligentsia in Russia and Crimea disapproved of this decision, however. In January 1991, by the results of a referendum, Crimea’s autonomous status was restored, owing to irredentist sentiments among the local Russian population (Popov, 2012). Within independent Ukraine, Crimea strengthened its autonomous status via the adoption of its own constitution, the introduction of the post of president, and the empowerment of local authorities, among other measures. After 1995, the dismissal of the pro-Russian President of Crimea Yuri Meshkov provided an opportunity for the Ukrainian authorities to lower the political status of the peninsula to that of an administrative-territorial autonomy, thereby ensuring control over the situation in the region.

Throughout the post-Soviet period, the economy of the peninsula gradually worsened; the transition from a planned to a market economy led to the closure of numerous enterprises, the reduction of fruit plantations and vineyards, and the deterioration of tourist infrastructure. The difficult economic situation was partially offset by the slow development of tourism, farming, trade, and services, which could not, however, revive the local economy and make it self-sufficient (Vendina, 2018). In the post-Soviet period, the region continued to experience financial difficulties; there was not enough money to maintain even the existing infrastructure. Crimea’s economic indicators lagged significantly behind the national average.[4] Meanwhile, the ambivalence of legislation, which allowed entrepreneurs to cut costs by avoiding tax liability and the state to cut budgets by reducing social support and public investment in infrastructure, contributed to the development of a semi-shadow economy, with private interests given priority over public ones.

Against the background of economic difficulties and the nation-state building of an independent and unitary Ukraine, contradictions and conflicts grew between key ethnic groups (Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars) in defining who Crimeans are and how they should live. Most surveys conducted in post-

[3] Postanovlenie Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR ot 5 fevralia 1954 goda “O peredache Krymskoi oblasti iz sostava RSFSR v sostav Ukrainskoi SSR” [Resolution of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR of February 5, 1954 On the Transfer of the Crimean Region from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR], in Sbornik zakonov RSFSR i Ukazov Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR 1946–1954 gg [Collection of laws of the RSFSR and decrees of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR 1946–1954], Moscow, 1955, pp. 105–108.

[4] Regions of Ukraine. Statistical publication. Part II, 2015.

Soviet Crimea, including recent ones (Sasse, 2017; Zadorin, 2018), have indicated that residents have a strong sense of regional identity, which, along with national identity, occupies an important place in the structure of their territorial identities. This regional identity is based on ideas about the remoteness and separateness of the peninsula (Goriunova, 2012; Zadorin, 2018) and the exclusivity of local lifestyles and views. In the late 1970s, these ideas were vividly illustrated by the Soviet dissident writer Vasilii Aksenov in the social utopia *The Island of Crimea*. Since 1991, however, the multiple local identities have been increasingly eclipsed by a Crimean-Russian identity, a result of the influence of the idea of political and cultural unity with Russia, which, in various forms, has been spread by the local media (Seregina and Chudinov, 2014) and exploited for political purposes by different actors (Sasse, 2007). In local public discourse, Crimea has tended to be presented as a historically Russian region associated with the Russian language and the dominant position of ethnic Russians, who feel oppressed in Ukraine by the imposition of the Ukrainian identity and alien rules, lifestyles, and ways of thinking (Filatov, 2012; Grigor'iants et al., 2011). In this discourse, the concept of *krymchanin* (Crimean) is associated exclusively with ethnic Russians, to the extent that it pushes from the public sphere discourses that promote different perspectives, in particular that of Crimean Tatars (Bezverkha, 2015).

LOCATIONS AND METHODS OF COLLECTING DATA

This article draws on the results of field studies conducted in Crimea between summer 2016 and autumn 2017. In these studies, we pursued two interrelated goals: Firstly, to explore the context of the region and the changes that have occurred since 2014 by conducting a series of expert interviews in the capital city of Simferopol, where we interviewed representatives of regional authorities responsible for the economy, transport, and external relations, as well as scientists and journalists.[5] Secondly, to consider in more detail the situation in two border cities in Northern Crimea, Armiansk and Dzhankoi, which were closely connected with the southern regions of Ukraine (Kherson, Odessa, Mikolaiv) by trade chains, labour and educational migration, family ties, etc. To this end, we conducted expert interviews with local officials, journalists, museum curators, social workers, and business people; held six focus groups (with eight to ten people each); and made field observations. The main method for gathering grassroots information was focus groups (open-ended group discussions)—a qualitative method that makes it possible to gauge collective opinion with a small number of informants (Levinson, 2007; Stewart et al., 2009).

Armiansk and Dzhankoi were chosen for field studies because they are administrative centres for two of the three of border municipalities that are located on the roads connecting Crimea and Ukraine and are in the vicinity of checkpoints—40 and 5 km away, respectively. They are home to one third of the urban population of Northern Crimea. Armiansk (22 thousands people) is a mono-industrial city; its primary chemical enterprise, Crimean Titan, provides employment for almost half the local population. As a result of the energy, water, and transport blockade of Crimea from Ukraine, Crimean Titan has been experiencing production difficulties since 2014, including interruptions to the supply of raw materials from Ukraine. The ethnic composition of Armiansk, according to census data from 2014, is predominantly Russian (57.7%) and Ukrainian (27.3%).[6] Dzhankoi (39 thousands people) is a former industrial city and now a principally commercial one, which has close links to the surrounding agricultural areas. Before the border appeared, Dzhankoi was also an important transport hub. It is crossed by railway lines that go towards Kharkiv and Kherson. Many local residents previously worked in the transit sector. After 2014, the Dzhankoi transport hub became a transport dead end. As in Armiansk, in Dzhankoi, Russians make up the majority of the population (66.8%), followed by Ukrainians (16.6%) and Crimean Tatars (7.3%).

To determine the composition of the focus groups, we tried to take into account the specifics of both cities and their populations. We expected that different groups of the local population would give diverse responses to the new geopolitical, legal, and socioeconomic situation in Crimea and would, therefore, have different attitudes towards the new border. We decided to focus on the most representative social groups, regardless of how involved they were in cross-border practices and interactions, and to pay particular attention to the most economically active part of the population, those aged 30 to 50 years. For the selection of participants, we defined three criteria: age, professional activity, and ethnic self-identification. The latter was important because local Ukrainians lost their titular nation status, becoming an ethnic minority, and Crimean Tatars lost their former influence because their representative body (Mejlis), supported by Ukraine, was declared an extremist organisation by Russia. Based on these criteria and our capabilities, the number and composition of the focus groups were as follows: In Dzhankoi, (1) pensioners, who make up more than a third of the population; (2) state employees with work experience before and after 2014; (3) local entrepreneurs and self-employed people; and (4) mixed groups with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. In Armiansk, the focus groups com-

[5] A total of 25 face-to-face expert interviews were conducted.

[6] This data can be accessed via the website of Krymstat [Russian language only]: https://crimea.gks.ru/folder/28296.

prised (1) workers of the Crimean Titan enterprise and (2) local entrepreneurs.

The research design of the focus groups was developed by the authors with the assistance of leading experts from the Levada Center[7], one of the most competent and independent sociological agencies in Russia. The flexible guide for conducting group discussions included the following topics: images of Russia and the neighbouring state; current relations between Ukraine and Russia; border-related practices and cross-border mobility; interactions between people in the multi-ethnic environment of cities and across the border; perceptions of the border; well-being; and the specifics of everyday life. To overcome the psychological disposition of participants to meet the expectations of researchers and hide their true opinions, we introduced projective questioning techniques (e.g., standard methods of associations, combinations, metaphorization, semantic attribution, etc.). For example, participants were asked to simulate abstract (that is, hypothetical) dialogues between Ukraine and Russia, and between those countries and Armiansk or Dzhankoi, as if these states and cities were people who suddenly met. During these dialogues, it was important to record the reactions and comments of participants. This task, which complemented the open discussion on the current relationships in the Russia-Crimea-Ukraine triangle, made it possible to assess how locals perceive neighbouring states and their policy towards Crimea. In another task, we asked participants to supplement with necessary details a "map" that, initially, depicted only three cities (Moscow, Kiev, and either Dzhankoi or Armiansk). The results were then commented on and openly discussed. The aim of the task was to identify participants' desired state of geographic space, ties, and communications between Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine, and, thereby, ascertain attitudes towards what they consider to be the true state of affairs and gain insights into which borders people deem important and where they draw them. Relatedly, we also asked participants to consider the possible implications of a total opening or total closing of the de facto border.

The recruitment of participants was carried out by professional recruiters using the "snowball" method. Focus group participants were then selected by screening the files of respondents in terms of the aforementioned selection criteria (age, professional activities, and ethnic self-identification). The focus groups were moderated by a practising sociologist from Simferopol, who was recommended by Russian colleagues with extensive experience in the study of public opinion using this method. All focus groups were audio recorded and then decoded for further analysis. All quotations from participants are verbatim (translations our own). All interviews were conducted in confidentiality; the names of interviewees are withheld (only general descriptions of individuals or groups will be used as identifiers).

[7] In Russia the Levada Center was recognised as a foreign agent in September 2016.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS UKRAINE AND THE DE FACTO BORDER

According to recent surveys (see, e.g., (O'Loughlin and Toal, 2019; Sasse, 2017)), most residents of Crimea remain in favour of being part of Russia. Our research in Northern Crimea shows that a majority of residents have a negative attitude towards Ukraine. Like mainstream Russian media, they portray Ukraine as a weak state that is dependent on Western countries, hostile to Russia and Crimea, and governed by Ukrainian nationalists and corrupt politicians who are responsible for everything in the country.

The perception of Ukraine as a hostile state stems from local concerns about neighbourhood issues, particularly personal and collective security. In Dzhankoi and Armiansk, focus group participants recalled their fear of the possibility of military action in Crimea after Euromaidan in Kiev. They recounted how locals heroically opposed nationalist groups who came to the peninsula to organise provocations and riots in order to intimidate the Russian-speaking population of Crimea. From an abstract dialogue in which participants role-played as Dzhankoi and Ukraine:

Dzhankoi *When will you stop offending the Russian-speaking population?*

Ukraine *Just you wait, I'll get you too.* (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

In their opinion, it was Russia that was able to protect them at that time. In all focus groups, participants expressed their gratitude to Russia for its decisiveness in that situation. They believed that Russia still performs this function. From an abstract dialogue in which participants role-played as Dzhankoi and Russia:

Dzhankoi *Russia, thank you for lending a helping hand.*

Russia *We will protect you.* (focus group with self-employed persons in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

For participants, a sense of security seemed to be the most important positive result of the 2014 annexation, owing to their view of Russia as a strong and powerful state. They talked about the psychological comfort, protection, order, and peace that Russia could provide them:

The advantage is that we go to bed and get up in peace. This transition from Ukraine to Russia, which happened peaceably, cannot be compared with anything. I saw how, overnight, they [residents of Ukraine] *moved from a*

peaceful life to military operations. [...] *The fact that there is no war in Crimea already means a lot. We moved to Russia.* (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

In this context, the border with Ukraine was associated with the need to ensure the security of Crimeans. As one participant put it, "The border is needed, if only for order and so that no one can get here, particularly those who want to engage in subversion here. They [those who serve the political regime of Ukraine] want to make life worse for us" (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

The task in which participants were asked to imagine a full opening of the border also demonstrated the importance of the security function of the border for residents. They believed that the border regime should not be softened since the proximity to a hostile state poses a potential danger. The following are examples of statements made by focus group participants on this issue:

If they [Ukrainian nationalists] *come here, it will be worse than in Donetsk.* (focus group with entrepreneurs in Armiansk, 18.11.2017).

They [Ukrainian nationalists] *will come here from Ukraine; this will lead to a lot of bloodshed. Half of the residents will be slaughtered.* (focus group with workers in Armiansk, 18.11.2017).

There will be a mess, chaos. Extremists will come here, the Right Sector,[8] *and so on.* (focus group with state employees in Dzhankoi, 13.10.2017).

Participants were nostalgic for the relationship that existed between Russia and Ukraine in Soviet times. They reproduced the Russophile myth about the "sisterhood" of three Slavic republics—Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. And they were certain that Russia and Ukraine are historically linked and destined to friendship and cooperation:

I would like to return to the relationship that was before. After all, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were three sisters. And now they have been torn apart. [...] *Ukraine needs to stick with Russia and Belarus.* [...] *This was the Soviet Union. This model of the state is not ideal, but so far, we haven't had a better one.* (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

At the same time, however, participants did not believe that reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia or between Ukraine and Crimea could be possible in the future—something which the following abstract dialogue demonstrates:

Dzhankoi *Let's be friends, such that the friendship is never interrupted.*

Ukraine *You* [Crimeans] *are traitors.* (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

WELL-BEING AND CHANGES TO DAILY LIFE

Polls conducted by the Russian sociological agency Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) in Crimea in 2015 showed that 71% of those polled indicated that their expectations after joining Russia were confirmed, and 22% reported that their expectations had been met in some respects (e.g. security and stability) but not in others (e.g. improved living standards and costs).[9] According to surveys from 2016, respondents cited transport and road problems, unemployment, and a rise in prices as the region's most troubling issues.[10]

In all our focus groups, participants spoke in one form or another about the improvements to their lived environment following the 2014 referendum. For instance, they often pointed out the progress made in urban infrastructure: "When Crimea was part of Ukraine, it was always in shadow [...] Dzhankoi has always been dark, black. There is now light here. And before it was just dark" (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017). In interviews, local authorities, comparing their current situation to that before the annexation, emphasised the window of opportunity that had opened for urban improvement programmes, including the reconstruction of lighting, sewerage systems, central streets and squares, as well as the renovation of public buildings, schools, and hospitals. Decreased competition in local markets and the inflow of Russian money via state transfers and investments have had a stabilising effect and even revived certain areas of the urban economy, in particular the construction industry, trade, and services.

We found significant differences of opinion regarding changes in living standards and financial circumstances. Groups of pensioners and state employees gave the most positive assessments: they were pleased with the increase in income and expressed greater confidence in the future. This can be explained by the fact that pensions and wages in the public sector were aligned with Russian averages (at least before the sharp rise in prices). As one participant in the group of state employees in Dzhankoi put it:

[8] The Right Sector is a far-right Ukrainian nationalist political party and paramilitary movement whose activists took part in the anti-government riots during the Euromaidan in Kiev in late 2013 and early 2014. In the Russian Federation, the Right Sector is recognised as an extremist organisation.

[9] This polling data, posted by FOM on May 19, 2015, can be accessed via the following link: https://fom.ru/Nastroeniya/12165.

[10] Polling data from 2016, posted by FOM on January 12, 2016, can be accessed via the following link: https://fom.ru/posts/12471.

In my opinion, it has changed. And it has changed for the better. Because there is more confidence. There are some guarantees for tomorrow. And now state employees and retirees are receiving higher wages than in Ukraine. Of course, there have been great changes. (13.10.2017).

Participants also noted the responsiveness of the Russian authorities and the attention given to their needs. They contrasted this with their experience of being part of Ukraine, which they felt had abandoned them:

Authorities can be reached. Here, near the house of culture, you know, there were crows on the footpath, and there was excessive noise all day. So we wrote a statement and requested that measures be taken. Cars arrived, everything was removed, they cut down the nests [...] *The streets are now lit; lamps were installed on the poles. We felt the changes. The road is done. It got better nonetheless.* (focus group with pensioners in Dzhankoi, 13.10.2017).

Negative assessments prevailed in the groups of entrepreneurs and workers of Crimean Titan, who were more affected by changes to the rules of doing business and the transition to a different legal and economic system. Comparing the conditions for doing business in Ukraine to those in Russia, entrepreneurs noted the emergence of difficulties with regard to re-registration, new business rules, tax increases, etc.: "Life was easier for me in Ukraine. It is a little harder for me in Russia. Financially. It was easier to make money in Ukraine. It is more difficult under Russian regulations" (focus group with self-employed persons in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017). Indeed, not all local enterprises were able to overcome these difficulties; some of them had to cease their activities, while others were forced to cut jobs or restructure. The frustration of workers in Armiansk largely stemmed from the problems experienced by the Crimean Titan enterprise, which faced interruptions to the supply of raw materials and water, and began to reduce the number of employees.

At the same time, almost all focus group participants believed that, sooner or later, Russia would help Crimea to raise living standards, including by ensuring law and order. Their hopes for a better future were extraordinarily high. As one person, role-playing Russia, put it in an abstract dialogue: "I will definitely help you. You will live better" (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

THE CROSS-BORDER RELATIONSHIP AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

The emergence and arrangement of the border in Northern Crimea led to a reduction in travel by local residents to Ukraine and in contacts with residents of neighbouring regions. According to data obtained in interviews with officials, the flow of people across the border after Crimea joined Russia decreased by about 20% annually, including those travelling to Crimea from Ukraine. The total number of border crossings fell from 3.6 mln in 2014 to 2.5 mln in 2017.

Most of the respondents and focus group participants in Armiansk and Dzhankoi stopped travelling to Ukraine, although they used to travel quite often. Their main explanation for this was the difficulty of crossing the border. In 2014, all regular public transport routes between Crimea and Ukraine were cancelled. In their place appeared irregular private connecting bus routes that went towards checkpoints (two are located near Armiansk–Kalanchak and Chaplinka; and another, Chongar, between Dzhankoi and Genichesk), which allow passengers to cross the border on foot. In the cold season, passing through the Chongar checkpoint is especially difficult, because the distance between the posts on the two sides of the border is about 3 km and requires crossing a bridge over Lake Sivash, which is buffeted by strong winds. Later in 2014, the two posts were connected by a minibus. It is also possible to cross the border by a car registered in Ukraine. However, after Crimeans were forced to re-register their personal vehicles and obtain Russian license plates in 2016, their opportunities to go to Ukraine sharply decreased.

Focus group participants also cited the border-crossing procedure, which involves long lines and meticulous and humiliating checks of documents and baggage, as a reason why they stopped travelling. A third reason was a fear of being detained, arrested, or deported. Finally, the previous incentives to travel to Ukraine disappeared. After 2014, numerous ties between Northern Crimea and Ukraine were interrupted, such as university studies, permanent or seasonal jobs, and international travel. Previously, many local entrepreneurs had travelled to Odessa, Mikolaiv, and other large nearby cities in Ukraine to purchase clothing and food products that were in demand in Crimea or to sell agricultural products. Since 2014, there have been border restrictions on the transport of a wide range of goods, including those introduced by Russia in connection with the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. Thus, the main reason for travelling to Ukraine is now visits to relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

The political events of 2014 in Crimea and Ukraine have become a real test of the strength of social and family ties between the inhabitants of Northern Crimea and Ukraine. Some participants of the focus groups said that relationships with Ukrainian friends and relatives living in Ukraine have not changed:

My niece lives in Zaporozhye. My sister visits her once or twice a month. People there are the same. They treat us as we treat them—that is, the same. No difference. It seems to me that they have not yet managed to become so different in three years. (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

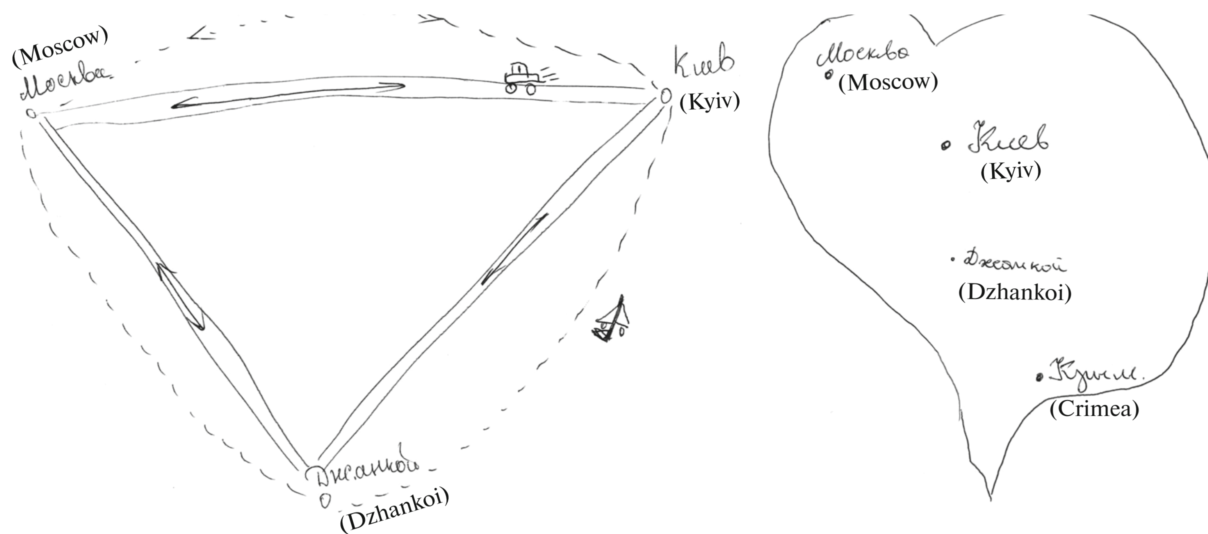

Fig. 2. Imagined common space between Crimea, Ukraine, and Russia drawn by state employees in Dzhankoi.

Others emphasised that they maintained relationships but stopped talking about politically sensitive topics: "If I do not talk about politics with my godfather, he is a wonderful, sweet person. But if I touch on ..." (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017). Still others admitted that communication with relatives and friends has soured because of political and ideological differences. All these scenarios were described in each of the six focus groups, regardless of its composition. The cooling or rupturing of relations between people indicates not only the influence of propaganda, which gives polar-opposite assessments of a political event depending on the side of the border, but also the important role played by personal beliefs.

Despite current political differences, which participants mostly blamed on the Ukrainian authorities, the residents of Northern Crimea continue to treat the residents of Ukraine well. They are considered kind, good, familiar, close, and primarily friendly:

Russians treat Ukraine very well. Friendly. Well, we were all Ukrainians. How can we be unkind to Ukrainians?! (focus group with state employees in Dzhankoi, 13.10.2017).

I think that Russians are nice to Ukrainians, while in Ukraine, some Ukrainians treat Russians decently and others treat them badly. (focus group with self-employed persons in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

On the whole, participants thought that personal contacts should be maintained despite the poor current relations between Russia and Ukraine. They sincerely believed that Crimea's change of state affiliation should not lead to a rupture of cordial relations between people on opposite sides of the border.

In this sense, the border is perceived as a barrier that impedes communication and complicates social relations between Crimea and Ukraine. This was clearly demonstrated in the task where participants were asked to draw and describe a map. Most participants connected Dzhankoi or Armiansk to Moscow and Kiev with lines or united them in a big heart (Fig. 2). According to these participants, the residents of Ukraine, Russia, and Crimea are "all brothers, sisters, and the boundary marker is outside Kiev [...] everybody should communicate; there should be no borders" (focus group with state employees in Dzhankoi, 13.10.2017). Despite the emergence of the border, most people did not depict it in their drawings. Instead, they perceived the space between Crimea and Ukraine as united in terms of the relationships between people and places. Crimeans are familiar with the way of life in Ukraine; they can easily communicate and understand people there; and they therefore do not want to be divided by a border. As one participant described his drawing:

I don't see any borders. Moscow is in the centre. On the one side, there is Kiev; on the other, Crimea-Dzhankoi. There is an empty space between them [the cities]. *So, Ukraine and Crimea should not be divided. There are no borders.* (focus group with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Dzhankoi, 14.10.2017).

Only a few participants in different focus groups drew the border between Kiev and Moscow, but not the border between Kiev and Dzhankoi (Fig. 3). As one person explained: "And between Kiev and Moscow there is just such a border [...] A fence that cannot be crossed" (focus group with state employees in Dzhankoi, 13.10.2017). These were participants who had stopped travelling to Ukraine and believed they could not cross the border: 'And I drew a border. I feel

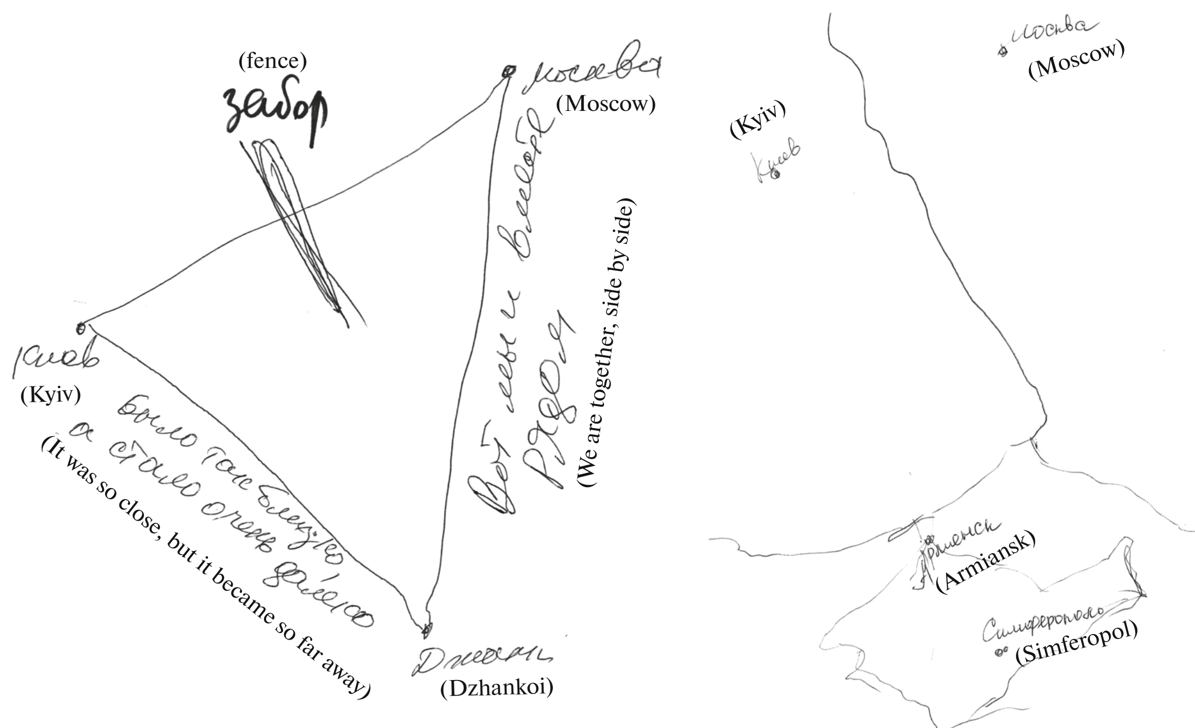

Fig. 3. Imagined divisions between Crimea, Ukraine, and Russia drawn by state employees in Dzhankoi (left) and entrepreneurs in Armiansk (right).

this border. I can't travel to Ukraine. Maybe that is why I depicted it like that. [...] I feel this border because I can't get there' (focus group with entrepreneurs in Armiansk, 18.11.2017).

Another test yielded a similar picture. Participants were absolutely convinced that it would be impossible to fully close the border or toughen the border regime. In their view, it is already quite inconvenient and creates many problems for everyday life, such as communication between relatives and friends, cross-border trade, and other activities motivated by territorial proximity to Ukraine and its markets.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper examines how people in Northern Crimea perceive Ukraine and regional neighbours, how they assess the changes since 2014, and what meanings they attach to the newly emerged border between Russia and Ukraine. Our research shows that local residents mostly accept the border because of their fears of Ukraine, which they perceive as a hostile state that continues to threaten Crimeans. Russia, by contrast, is considered a helper and protector. This is consistent with the discourse of Russian and local media about Ukraine and with the self-identifications of most residents in terms of their regional identity (i.e. those who identify as Crimean-Russian).

Acceptance of the border was affected by how residents assessed changes in social welfare and the costs and benefits of the border's emergence, which depended on the point of view of different groups in the local society. Most pensioners and state employees reported satisfaction with the changes, whereas entrepreneurs and factory workers viewed them more critically because of peripheralization, the rupturing of previous economic and transport ties, and changes in business rules. Meanwhile, most participants believed that Russia should provide Crimea with economic growth and modernisation. At the level of everyday life, the border is a hindrance to residents of the region, since they have relatives, friends, and acquaintances who live in Ukraine. In addition, Northern Crimea was previously connected to Ukraine by economic and transport links, which made it possible to save and earn money, and to travel. A majority of residents we interviewed see the space between Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine as united, and they idealise the relationship that existed in Soviet times. They want Ukraine to accept the loss of Crimea and build constructive relations with it and Russia.

In the case of Northern Crimea, we can see the dialectical relationship between bordering, ordering, and othering. On the one hand, the deterioration of Crimeans' attitudes towards Ukraine as a state moti-

vated them to accept the de facto border between Ukraine and Russia. On the other hand, the new territorial order has provoked a reassessment of ideas about "us" and "them." Neighbours who used to live together are not yet perceived as "other," although many people are divided along political and ideological lines. At the same time, the adaptation of the population to the reshaping of borders is related both to changes in socio-spatial imagination and to comparisons across time that are important for evaluating the new territorial order. Residents of Northern Crimea are akin to transnational migrants, and they compare their lives before and after 2014. It seems to them that by joining Russia, they have a chance for a sustainable future and a guarantee to live in peace. So far, this outweighs all the difficulties that have arisen as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the appearance, in the northern part of the peninsula, of the new and contested international border between Ukraine and Russia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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