

THE SECURITY IMPACT OF THE ILLEGAL ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA ON THE TATAR COMMUNITY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *In today's geopolitical equation, the Black Sea is an area of "great strategic importance" (Jens Stoltenberg 2022) and has constantly been characterised by tensions in various forms. After 2014, the Black Sea area has become a hotspot, where soft-power politics have taken second place to the conventional war unleashed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, preceded by the illegal annexation of Crimea. Romania, a NATO member state and an important factor of stability in the Black Sea area, shares an important element of the societal component of Black Sea security: the ethnic Tatar community, which is directly connected to the Crimean conflict, given its origins with the Tatars on the peninsula. The purpose of this article is therefore to point out that the increased focus on the defence component following the annexation of Crimea, as a result of the militarisation of the peninsula and of the Black Sea basin by the Russian Federation, must be complemented by potential non-military vulnerabilities, in this case of a societal nature. The conclusions of the article will highlight that the societal dimension of security is important and needs increased attention from the authorities, as any challenge can become a vulnerability at any time, and also that a constant soft-power policy focused on the identity component can lead in time to the Russian Federation assuming the role of a kin-state at least for a part of the Tatar community in Romania.*

Keywords: *Tatar community; Crimea; Black Sea security; non-military vulnerabilities*

1. INTRODUCTION

After 2014, the discourse with ethnic overtones has supplemented the armed conflict during this period, increasing tensions in the Black Sea area, which is why, following an applied research, we will highlight in this article both military aspects, which are part of the traditional definitions of security, and societal aspects, a non-military dimension that equally defines security in Buzan's understanding. The multi-ethnic nature of Dobrogea, where most of the national minorities officially acknowledged by the Romanian state are present, has so far provided an opportunity to exploit the space between the Danube and the Black Sea from an identity point of view, creating the premises for a unique and inexhaustible cultural potential at national level. From the point of view of international relations, Dobrogea is seen, also in terms of its multi-ethnic character, as a factor of cultural diplomacy, which, following Brubaker's theory, provides the necessary context for a successful relationship between national minorities, the national state, in this case Romania, and the mother states. The Tatar community has a particularity compared to all the others: it does not

have a mother state, the role of protector being legally incumbent on Romania. The steps taken by various state and non-state actors after 2014 in order to get closer to the Tatar community in Romania, allowing them to validate the policy adopted by Moscow with regard to the ethnics on the peninsula, can be classified as associated challenges that may influence the internal security environment in the medium and short term.

2. ETHNIC MINORITIES IN ROMANIA

In the current geopolitical context, amid the war unleashed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, the Black Sea has become for Romania a landmark of security definition. In a note of predictability, the Romanian authorities have emphasised in the last two national defence strategies (2015-2019 and 2020-2024) the need to increase security in this area, amid threats such as the perpetuation of frozen conflicts in the region, but especially amid the actions taken by the Russian Federation in the area: "violation of international law norms, questioning the international order, preservation of frozen conflicts and annexation of Crimea" (SNAp, 2015:12). Always considered an area of strategic

interest for Romania, today the Black Sea represents a region with a strong political, economic, security and especially military and international significance. In this regard, the importance of multi-ethnic Dobrogea in the equation of maintaining a climate of stability at a national level, and by extrapolation at the NATO and EU level, is particularly important.

With a strong historical background, Romania has built up an image of a model state in the field of best practice policies towards national minorities, since 1990. The country's legislation, which is admirably harmonised with the international legislation, and the focus on the cultural life of ethnic communities have, over time, strengthened the public perception of these communities exclusively as a factor promoting multiculturalism and the model of inter-ethnic coexistence.

The need to analyse the role and place of these communities also from a security perspective has emerged amid the exploitation of the cultural component by an aggressor state, more specifically amid the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the outbreak of war in 2022, events that led to the emergence of a tense climate in the Black Sea area. From a theoretical point of view, the practice of local policies of ethnic minorities in our country follows the logic of a triadic relationship projected by Professor Rogers Brubaker (1996): *national minority - host State - motherland*. Currently, 20 national minorities are officially recognised in Romania, represented by 19 official organisations in parliament. Restricting the research area to Dobrogea, namely Constanța and Tulcea counties, we can see that the most numerous ethnic communities in this area were and still are the Turkish and the Tatar ones. According to the 2011 census, in Constanța and Tulcea counties there were 22,500 ethnic Turks out of a total of 27,698 declared nationwide and 19,720 ethnic Tatars out of a total of 20,282 declared nationwide. In the first population census conducted after December 1989, in 1992, the numbers weren't very different. Nationwide, 29,832 citizens declared themselves to be ethnic Turks, 26,685 of them in Constanța and Tulcea counties, and 24,596 citizens declared themselves to be ethnic Tatars, 24,185 of them being registered in Constanța and Tulcea counties. In this context, the national leadership structures of the two communities were established in Constanța, with most of the activity taking place in this region.

As for the ethnic Tatars of Dobrogea, they have strong ties with Crimea, having settled in Dobrogea area in the 16th century. Although they have

remained on Romanian territory for generations, the ethnic Tatars in our country have always kept in touch with those who remained in Crimea or settled in other countries. Historically, Tatars, regardless of the area they live in today, are strongly linked to the historic moment of 18 May 1944, the day when, on Stalin's orders, they were deported from the Crimean peninsula, so the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and later the war unleashed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine had a strong emotional impact on ethnic Tatars everywhere.

3. ETHNICITY IN THE UKRAINE'S WAR DISCOURSE

The Kremlin leader's aggressive, military-tinged rhetoric since the beginning of the invasion in March 2022 has been doubled by ethnic overtones. From the very first days, the military invasion was presented in Vladimir Putin's view as an action to "denazify Ukraine", which triggered the reaction of some Jewish leaders who stated that the Russian president was "distorting and trivialising the Holocaust". The Russian leaders continued their attacks on Jews through anti-Semitic messages, which created further discomfort in the Israeli government. Moscow Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Israel of "supporting the neo-Nazi regime in Kiev" and cited "tragic examples of cooperation between Jews and Nazis". In this way, Putin has tried to legitimise his aggressive acts in Ukraine by regularly making references to the Jewish people, in the public arena.

On the same note, we have to mention other ethnically-tinged messages used by the Kremlin to justify the military invasion of Ukraine. Just days before the invasion, at a press conference, Vladimir Putin accused Ukraine of "systematic and widespread human rights violations" against the Russian minority. This statement caused unrest in Western circles, which saw it as a Russian argument in favour of launching the invasion. The argument of protecting Russian citizens could become a leitmotiv of Russia's aggressive behaviour towards neighbouring countries where ethnic Russians live. Even the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of National Minorities has expressed concern about this dangerous practice.

Since the early days of the war, in the logic of an ethnic justification, the Russian president has tried to highlight the cultural and legal oppression to which the Russian-speaking population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions is subjected and the

roles of Russia, which can be analysed in the major frameworks of the Kremlin discourse, as Ruxandra Buluc and Ioan Deac show in a recent study (Buluc and Deac 2022, 88): Russia as savior (*Russia feels compassion for the oppressed people in Donbass*), Russia as a state that respects and promotes Russian cultural heritage within the country's borders and beyond, but above all the most dangerous of the discursive frames, those of the non-existence of Ukraine:

A very important framework that Putin is creating with regard to Ukraine is that it does not exist independently of Russia, neither culturally nor state-wise. I have called this a framework of non-existence of Ukraine. Ukraine cannot be accepted as a separate country from Russia because it shares the same history, the same culture. «I will never abandon the belief that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation» (Buluc and, Deac 2022, 88-89)."

Kremlin discursive frameworks revolve around cultural explanations, which serve as the force elements in Russian Federation narratives. From Russia's perspective, Ukraine is an artificial state, with no culture of its own and therefore no ethnic or religious identity, and which serves as an instrument of Western manipulation, especially of the United States. The cultural annihilation of Ukraine is the Kremlin's policy goal. Once Ukrainian claims are transformed into actions lacking cultural legitimacy, they lose any form of legitimacy. From this perspective, the war in Ukraine, starting in 2014 and continuing with the Russian invasion in 2022, is a war whose main stake is a cultural one, according to Moscow's official discourse, which tries to induce a rewritten and favourably interpreted history. To this challenge in the war of narratives, President Volodymyr Zelensky has responded by affirming the cultural, ethnic and religious identity of Ukrainians and invoking the right to self-determination. In this war of narratives, the positioning of the Russian leader is precise but anachronistic, in the analysis by Professors R. Buluc and I. Deac:

The strategic narrative that Putin creates is based on a language of separation reminiscent of the post-World War II period, demonstrating that Putin's representations of Russia and its missions operate on the historical scale of eternity, permanence, and infallibility of his visions of Russia as a defender (Buluc & Deac 2022, 96-97).

Justification in line with the projection of cultural differentiation to Ichheiser cannot be a

relevant explanation in the current security environment. However, such a justification is likely to produce distrust, doubts, uncertainties, fears in the states bordering the Black Sea or in those of the Wider Region, as long as Moscow's official policy, using science and, implicitly, the Russian Academy of Sciences, produces projections in line with the intentions of the Russian Federation. However, the most illustrative and recent example comes from Crimea.

4. CRIMEA, THE POLITICS OF REPRESSION AND INTIMIDATION

The current war in Ukraine has its roots in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, a political act that was internationally contested and vehemently rejected by the Tatars on the peninsula and internally supported. History has never been favourable to a good understanding between Russians and Tatars, on the contrary, the dissolution of the Crimean Khanate and the annexation of the peninsula in 1783 by Catherine II and then the "surrender" in 1944 when, on Stalin's orders,

187.859, according to Soviet sources, 238,500 according to Crimean Tatar sources, were deported (from Crimea) to Central Asia, Siberia and the Urals

are still vivid in the collective memory of ethnic Tatars no matter in which corner of the world they live today. The 2014 territorial misappropriation only revived the resentment Tatars have always had towards the Russians (Omer 2020).

Speaking in June 2022 at a meeting with American Jews in the context of the war in Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky warned that "Crimean Tatars in the occupied peninsula are subjected to very severe repression". (www.qha.com.tr). The situation, however, is one that has been ongoing since 2014 and has been reported both by Tatars who have managed to leave the peninsula and settle in other localities in Ukraine and by international authorities. The repression of ethnic Tatars has taken various forms and international public opinion has not ceased to report abuses and serious human rights violations.

The most common forms of intimidation of the remaining Tatars in Crimea were kidnappings. Most of those who have disappeared have been trusted members of the community, holding leadership positions in ethnic representative organisations, as the Russian authorities have sought to intimidate the population still protesting against the annexation, and to annihilate leaders in

order to impose their own representatives, as happened in 2015 when the religious leader, the head of the Muslim Cult in Crimea, was replaced by another mufti agreed by the Kremlin leadership. In 2016, a young Crimean Tatar member of the Coordinating Council of the World Congress of Crimean Tatars, Ervin Ibrahimov, disappeared from the front of his house and was forcibly taken away in a traffic police car. Also, in 2016, the Mejlis (the highest executive governing body of the National Parliamentary Congress of Crimean Tatars) was banned by the peninsula's Supreme Court and declared a "terrorist organisation".

The World Congress of Crimean Tatars is a governing body that brings together representatives of the Tatar communities from all over the world, in which the Romanian community has 4 representatives and whose last meeting took place in August 2015 in Ankara, where the situation in Crimea was intensely debated. As early as 2014, right after the annexation, the Russian authorities started the case against Refat Ciubarov (President of the Mejlis and the World Congress of Crimean Tatars, former member of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine and Vicepresident of the Crimean Parliament in Simferopol) for organising an unauthorised mass demonstration in Simferopol on 26 February 2014 against the imminent Russian occupation of the peninsula. As a result of this trial, Refat Ciubarov, now living in Kiev, was sentenced in 2021 by the Supreme Court of Crimea to 6 years in a maximum security prison, 200 hours of community service and a criminal fine of 200,000 rubles. Also in 2014, Mustafa Abdulcemil Kirimoglu (leader of Tatars everywhere and former deputy in the Kiev Supreme Rada) was banned from entering Crimea.

Media that were not controlled by the Russian authorities also posed a threat, so in April 2015 the Russian authorities decided to close down the ATR TV station, which broadcasted in the Tatar language and whose target audience were the Crimean Tatars. Amnesty International said at the time that the measure to close the TV station was "a blatant attack on freedom of expression, ornamented as an administrative procedure" which was "a brutal attempt to stifle independent media, to hinder dissenting voices and to intimidate the Crimean Tatar community". The station subsequently resumed its work in Kiev. The Tatar news agency "Qirim Haber Ajansi" was also relocated to Kiev, and remains the only source of information for Tatars, both in Ukraine and abroad, including Romania. Aware of the importance of

disseminating the message to as many countries as possible, the agency's coordinators decided to open news pages in Turkish, Ukrainian, Russian, English and even Romanian in addition to the Tatar language.

5. HOW THE ILLEGAL ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA INFLUENCED THE TATARS IN ROMANIA

The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, has reshaped the relations between ethnic Tatars in Romania and those in Crimea. Connections between the two communities have since been limited to very few opportunities for online interaction. A presence of Tatars from any country, including Romania, in Crimea in the context of the 2014 events and the international challenge to the annexation of the peninsula would be tantamount to a public declaration of acceptance of the territorial misappropriation and a violation of the international sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. The cultural demands for the preservation and promotion of identity values that were a constant in the daily lives of Crimean Tatars and the diaspora from 1990 to 2014 have been replaced by political ones. The World Congress of Crimean Tatars held in 2015 in Ankara, a body to which four representatives of Tatars from Romania were elected, became a common voice of Tatars from different corners of the world calling on the international community not to recognise the annexation of Crimea and to take measures for the return of the peninsula to the borders of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian press, as well as other media outlets to which ethnic diaspora had access, have been writing constantly since 2014 about the pressures on Crimean Tatars, abductions of mostly young Tatars who criticised the Russian authorities, the closing of schools in the Tatar language and the banning of Tatar leaders from entering Crimea (Radio Europa Liberă, 2020). In 2016, the National Assembly of Crimean Tatars (Mejlis) was declared by the so-called Supreme Court of Crimea to be an "extremist organisation", and the World Congress of Crimean Tatars meeting in 2015 in Ankara was no longer recognised by the Russian Federation authorities (Radio Free Europe, 2016). However, the World Tatar Congress in Kazan, established in 1992, has gained increased visibility and over the years has mainly gathered participants from former Soviet states.

Ethnic Tatars in Romania have organised, since 2014, a series of public activities condemning the

annexation of Crimea and the pressures to which the Tatars on the peninsula were subjected, directly targeting the diplomatic representations of the Russian Federation in Bucharest and Constanța (Adevărul 2015). In response, however, the diplomatic missions of the Russian Federation began a policy of rapprochement with the Tatars in Romania, trying to establish relations and interact with them in an attempt to impose their perception of the approach to the Crimean Tatar problem by the authorities in Moscow. Such a successful approach would be tantamount to an indirect recognition of the annexation of Crimea by Romania, an EU member state and NATO border landmark on the eastern flank. The diplomatic and distant approach of the only meeting requested by the Russian Consul General in Constanta himself with UDTTMR representatives in spring 2015, and the refusal of the latter to respond to the Russian diplomat's invitation to visit the Crimean Tatar community, reconfirmed the social-political cohesion and loyalty to the state, but also to democratic, European and Euro-Atlantic values of UDTTMR, an organisation that has officially represented the Tatars in Romania in the public arena for 25 years.¹

The split of the Tatar community in Romania in 2016, due to the temporary loss of the seat in the Romanian Parliament by UDTTMR and thus of its funding, led to increased visibility among ethnic and other organizations, which brought some Russian representatives closer to the Romanian community. A link in this regard among the Romanian community was the Tatar Democratic Union, based in Medgidia. Its leaders confirmed and publicly assumed after 2014 both their openness to having Russian diplomats accredited in Constanta in their midst, in the activities they organized, and their participation in international activities validating the policy of the Moscow authorities on the issue of the Tatars in the Crimean peninsula, as happened in 2019, when they participated in the World Congress of Tatars in Kazan (AGERPRES, 2019). For the first time since 2014, cultural and sports activities organised by UDT, which brought together Tatars from Romania, were attended by participants from Russia and Crimean Tatars (Replica 2019). In addition to this, members of the community, who are also representatives of associations, regularly visit the Russian Federation to participate in events

¹ According to interviews with UDTTMR representatives who attended the meeting

organised by the Russian authorities for local ethnic Tatars.

The increasing frequency of activities that, after 2014, have brought the Tatar community in Romania closer to Moscow politicians in the public space, even if only in terms of image, has created concern among the community, with UDTTMR leaders and the representative of the Muftiate of the Muslim Cult in Romania constantly raising alarm signals regarding the interference of foreign (non)state entities in the life of the Tatar community in Romania, these activities being perceived as a threat to the community with national implications (România liberă 2020). Their approach has been reconfirmed at the level of the authorities, with the mayor of Constanța in 2020, Decebal Făgădău, taking a public stance, following a controversial visit to Constanța by the Russian Federation ambassador, and pointing out that the “unprincipled actions of some foreign diplomats present in Constanța” may affect the climate of interethnic coexistence specific to Dobrogea. It is also the mayor of Constanța who highlights a very important issue, with reference to the security of the area and our country's status as a NATO member state:

I understand the increased interest of some regional powers towards Dobrogea, especially since the military base «Mihail Kogălniceanu» will become the largest US military base in Europe, with all the security guarantees and advantages for our country (Făgădău, 2020).

With its accession to NATO in 2004, Romania has clearly defined and assumed its future policy in relation to the current spheres of influence in the Black Sea. As the study on the Tatar community in Romania after 2014 shows, this has not prevented the players in the area from seeking solutions in an attempt to reconfigure the balance of power in the area. The tense situation in the wider Black Sea region, especially after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (2014), has accelerated the process of strengthening military capabilities, but has also opened up new paradigms for addressing challenges, vulnerabilities and threats in the region.

The illegal annexation of Crimea has triggered an increase in tensions across the Black Sea region and a rewriting of security strategies in the area. Romania has also adapted its National Defence Strategy and the document for the period 2015-2019 was built around two framework concepts for the first time: “extended national security” and

“security culture” (SNAT 2015 - 2019). The same strategy, drawn up one year after the illegal annexation of Crimea, was based, among other things, on the "global paradigm shift" focused on the deterioration of relations between NATO and the Russian Federation, a situation that “directly raises the issue of the security of Romanian citizens”. In the National Defence Strategy for the period 2020-2024, the Russian Federation is mentioned three times in the chapters “Threats” (points 119, 121) and “Risks” (point 155), a situation that has drawn a chain reaction from Russian officials (SNAT 2020 - 2024).

The present approach is intended to point out that the increased emphasis, after the annexation of Crimea, on the defence component as a result of the militarisation of the peninsula in general and of the Black Sea basin by the Russian Federation must be complemented by potential non-military vulnerabilities, in this case of a societal nature. The multi-ethnic nature of Dobrogea, where most of the national minorities officially recognised by the Romanian state are present, has so far provided an opportunity to exploit the space between the Danube and the Black Sea from an identity point of view, creating the premises for a unique and inexhaustible cultural potential at national level. From the point of view of international relations, Dobrogea is seen, also in terms of its multi-ethnic character, as a factor of cultural diplomacy, which, following Brubaker's theory, provides the necessary context for a successful relationship between national minorities, the national state, in this case Romania, and the mother states. The Tatar community has a particularity compared to all the others, namely that it does not have a mother state, the role of protector legally devolving upon Romania. The steps taken by various state and non-state actors to get close to the Tatar community in Romania in order to validate Moscow's policy towards the ethnic population of the peninsula can be classified as associated challenges that may influence the internal security environment in the medium and short term.

6. CONCLUSIONS

From the experience of the Tatar community in Romania after 2014 we can conclude that the societal dimension of security is important and needs equally close attention from the authorities, as any challenge can become a vulnerability at any time. We could also conclude that a constant *soft-*

power policy focused on the identity component may lead in time to the Russian Federation assuming the role of a kin-state at least for part of the Tatar community in Romania.

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