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*Daria Romanenko,
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6264-7112*

FROM EUROPEAN PEARL TO MILITARIZED ENCLAVE: A TWELVE-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE ON THE OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA

Crimea has historically been far more than a mere peninsula. Defined by its temperate climate, extraordinary natural beauty, and strategic maritime position, it once stood as a perennial center of gravity for international tourism and European integration. For many, Crimea represented a pinnacle of aesthetic and cultural richness. However, this trajectory was violently interrupted on February 20, 2014 – the date officially recognized as the onset of the Russian occupation. This paper examines the retrospective trajectory of the occupied Ukrainian territories over more than a decade, tracing the peninsula's transition from the European prosperity of 2013 to the systemic decline witnessed in 2026. This evaluation of Crimea is grounded in both political analysis and direct, personal observation as a native of Sevastopol who lived through the initial phase of the occupation.

The beginning of the occupation in early 2014 was marked by rapid, coordinated Russian military maneuvers designed to subvert local governance. On February 20, 2014, armored columns from the Russian Black Sea Fleet's 810th Marine Brigade exited Kazachya Bay under the guise of "heightened security" due to Ukraine's political instability following the Euromaidan protests. By February 23, Sevastopol had effectively fallen under Russian control following the appointment of a Moscow-aligned "people's mayor" and the rapid formation of paramilitary "self-defense" units.

Civic resistance reached a critical climax on February 26, when thousands of supporters of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, alongside pro-Ukrainian citizens, gathered at the regional parliament in Simferopol to block separatist legislation. However, overnight, Russian Spetsnaz units – unmarked soldiers colloquially referred to as "little green men" – seized the Verkhovna Rada (the regional parliament) and the Council of Ministers. By March 7, all key administrative buildings across the peninsula were occupied, vital transit routes to mainland Ukraine were severed, and Ukrainian military garrisons were fully blockaded.

At the onset of the occupation, a profound shift occurred almost overnight. Following a pseudo-referendum that completely disregarded the actual will of the populace, the physical and cultural landscape changed. In Sevastopol, a sea of Russian tricolors replaced the cosmopolitan aesthetic of the embankments. While some segments of the local population celebrated without realizing the long-term consequences, the atmosphere for those who understood the implications was one of profound loss.

The educational system was quickly leveraged as a primary tool for Russification. The Ukrainian language was stripped from the curriculum, and promised electives in Ukrainian never materialized. By the fifth grade, school children were subjected to "documentary" screenings claiming Crimea was "historically Russian territory" that had been "illegally" held by Ukraine.

This systemic indoctrination even extended to music lessons, where students were compelled to sing the Russian national anthem. Every cultural tie to mainland Ukraine was systematically severed to frame the Ukrainian state as an enemy of the Crimean people.

While Crimea did not see active combat in 2014, psychological tension remained pervasive. Pro-Ukrainian citizens lived in silence, while the Crimean Tatar community faced targeted, systemic repressions. Activists and dissenters simply vanished – either surfacing later in Russian prisons or disappearing entirely.

Physical and societal changes observed during subsequent visits in 2018 and 2021 reveal a startling, compounding decline. Infrastructure projects have come at a devastating cost to the region's environment and heritage. For example, the construction of the "Tavrida" highway resulted in the mass deforestation of ancient orchards and the physical destruction of the 14th-century Kirk-Azizler burial ground – a staggering loss of cultural heritage. Furthermore, a deliberate demographic shift has taken place. By 2021, the behavior, speech, and appearance of the local population confirmed a massive influx of relocated Russian nationals, representing a clear case of state-sponsored demographic engineering.

Under occupation, Sevastopol has come to feel like a stagnant relic of the Soviet era, devoid of genuine urban development. Elsewhere on the peninsula, the situation is even bleaker, as evidenced by the amateurish "restoration" work at the Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai, which caused irreversible structural damage to this vital Crimean Tatar cultural monument. Additionally, formerly open public areas and landmarks, such as those in Phoros and Partenit, have been closed off to the general populace, while it has become increasingly clear that the only sector receiving genuine, consistent investment is the Russian military machine.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022, the transformation of Crimea has been finalized: it has been turned into a critical military springboard for attacks on Southern Ukraine and a key launch site for missile and drone strikes. Compounding this tragedy, the local Ukrainian population on the peninsula is now being illegally conscripted into the very occupying army that controls their home.

In retrospect, these past twelve years illustrate a tragic regression. Crimea has been transformed from a culturally rich, European-oriented region into a militarized enclave echoing the stagnation of the Soviet period. Restoring Ukrainian sovereignty and achieving de-occupation remains a non-negotiable priority. It represents the only viable path toward liberating political prisoners, preserving endangered cultural heritage, and rehabilitating the natural resources that have been systematically depleted under occupation.