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Russia's Recolonization of Crimea

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More than six years have passed since Russia opportunistically annexed the Crimean Peninsula in the wake of Ukraine's 2013–14 Euromaidan Revolution. The Kremlin's grip on Crimea has only tightened in that time, yet many Ukraine watchers remain preoccupied with the Donbas region in the country's east. The Donbas has been devastated by protracted armed conflict and fractured into separate "Peoples' Republics" by Russia-backed separatists. In contrast, Russian forces managed to seize and impose formal sovereignty over Crimea in a virtually bloodless coup, staging a referendum on the region's status to cosmetically legitimize the occupation of another state's territory—the first such annexation to occur in Europe since World War II.

This semblance of legitimacy, coupled with Crimea's ethnic Russian majority and the long-standing presence of the Russian military in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, has led some outside observers to accept the Kremlin's rhetorical framing of Crimea's "reunification" with Russia as the restoration of a natural political and territorial order, even if they object to the subversive means by which it was achieved. In reality, Crimea's apparent Russianness is in no way natural or inherent, but rather a product of Russian/Soviet colonialism. The 2014 annexation merely revived centuries of violent imperial policy.

A History of Subjugation

In his now-infamous speech marking Russia's official absorption of Crimea on March 18, 2014, President Vladimir Putin declared that "in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia." He invoked a number of popular myths meant to establish that the peninsula's Russian essence dated to antiquity. In fact, Crimea first entered the Russian sphere only in the late eighteenth century.

Seeking to extend its military presence in the Black Sea region and bolster its image as a formidable imperial power, the Russian Empire under Catherine II formally annexed and began colonizing Crimea in 1783. (For the sake of historical perspective, this was just one year before the founding of the first Russian colony in Alaska.) Russian forces pried Crimea from its joint rule under the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate; the latter was a vestige of the Mongol Empire led by the peninsula's primary indigenous group, the Crimean Tatars. Descended from a diverse array of nomadic and sedentary peoples who had made their homes on the peninsula over millennia, the Crimean Tatars are Turkic-speaking Muslims whose national identity is deeply rooted in their sense of belonging to Crimea.

Mimicking the policies of other European colonizers, Russian authorities swiftly confiscated Crimea's lands and redistributed them among the Russian nobility, forcing the Crimean Tatars into economic, political, cultural, and religious subjugation. Crimea was also rapidly militarized, beginning with the founding of Sevastopol as a strategic naval base near the peninsula's southwestern tip. This base would place Crimea at the center of the Crimean War of 1853–56, pitting Russia against its imperial rivals: Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire.

Spurred initially by Russia's oppressive policies and later by the widespread violence of the Crimean War, an exodus of Crimean Tatars to Ottoman territories initiated a drastic shift in the peninsula's demographics during the nineteenth century. Thousands of predominantly Slavic peasants arrived to fill the resultant labor shortage. The growth of Crimea's Slavic population—comprising

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mostly Russians—soon dwarfed the dwindling number of Crimean Tatars, who were reduced to about one-quarter of the population by the time the Soviet Union was founded in 1922. By then, Crimea was already steeped in a Russian mythology that identified the peninsula as the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy, a symbol of military glory, the muse of cherished Russian writers and artists, and a playground of the elite.

Despite superficial efforts to promote the development of Crimean Tatar culture and language through policies of *korenizatsiya*, or "root-making," that were applied to ethnic minorities throughout the Soviet Union, the early Soviet period saw a continuation of imperial policies that expanded Russian cultural hegemony and majority status in Crimea. This trend culminated tragically on May 18, 1944, when Joseph Stalin ordered that the entire Crimean Tatar population be rounded up and deported to Central Asia and other far-flung corners of the Soviet Union—an act predicated on false accusations of widespread collaboration with German forces during the Nazi occupation of Crimea. Some estimate that nearly half of the roughly 240,000 deported Crimean Tatars perished in transit to their places of exile. The survivors were forbidden under Soviet law from returning to their homeland for the next 45 years. Effectively emptied of its indigenous people, Crimea's forced transformation into a Russian cultural space was complete.

Crimea's apparent Russianness is in no way natural or inherent.

Although Russians now constituted a clear majority on the peninsula, Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian republic of the Soviet Union in 1954—a move presented as an act of "friendship" between Russians and Ukrainians, but based on practical considerations regarding transportation and energy infrastructure and efficiency of territorial administration. Once home to palaces and manicured grounds belonging to the Russian nobility, by the 1950s Crimea emerged as a center of tourism for the proletariat masses and of retirement homes for the Soviet elite, further obfuscating the erasure of its indigenous population and culture.

Crimea became a part of independent Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, though Russia retained control of the naval base at Sevastopol. Strong pro-Russian sentiment among many residents nearly plunged Crimea into ethnoterritorial conflict in the early 1990s, but tensions eventually cooled to a simmer until 2014.

Following a decades-long protest movement unrivaled in Soviet history for its persistence and determination, the Crimean Tatars had won the hard-fought right to return to Crimea in the late 1980s, and began arriving in large numbers after 1991. Unable to reclaim their former homes and lands now occupied by Russians and Ukrainians, the Crimean Tatars built squatter communities in unoccupied areas across the peninsula that were gradually integrated into the urban landscape. Despite receiving only meager support from the nascent Ukrainian state, the Crimean Tatars viewed Kyiv as an ally against the latent threat of Russian separatism in Crimea, and most backed Ukrainian sovereignty over their homeland.

By 2014, Crimean Tatars made up only about 12 percent of Crimea's population; ethnic Ukrainians accounted for around 24 percent, and ethnic Russians still held the majority with roughly 60 percent. Seizing on the brief power vacuum created in the days immediately after the Euromaidan Revolution toppled the Russia-friendly administration of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, on February 27, 2014, the Kremlin orchestrated a takeover of Crimea's organs of power by the "little green men"—Russian military personnel wearing no national insignia. The occupying forces hastily organized a March 16 referendum on Crimea's status. The vote was riddled with improprieties and dubiously returned near-unanimous support for joining Russia.

Accepting these results and officially annexing the peninsula on March 18, Russia completed its second seizure of Crimea some 231 years after the first, and 23 years after losing it to independent Ukraine. Although the vast majority of foreign governments still recognize Crimea as a Ukrainian territory under Russian occupation, the Kremlin has thoroughly integrated the peninsula into its federal structure and now operates there virtually unimpeded as a colonizing power.

On Moscow Time

Due to the legacy of Crimea's initial colonization, Russian language, culture, and ethnic identities still predominated on the peninsula by the time the Kremlin reclaimed it. But formal changes were nevertheless required to bring Crimea into alignment with the Russian Federation's political and judicial order.

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Crimea entered Russia's administrative structure as two separate federal subjects: the Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. Together, the two initially constituted their own federal district, but they were merged with the Southern Federal District in July 2016. Crimea's clocks were moved forward two hours on March 30, 2014, to shift the peninsula from Kyiv's time zone to Moscow's. The Russian ruble replaced the Ukrainian hryvnia as the official currency a month later.

The legal status of Crimea's residents also changed immediately following the annexation. Everyone was automatically given Russian citizenship unless they filed a formal refusal during a brief period in April 2014. Those who refused and retained only their Ukrainian citizenship were rendered foreigners in their own homeland and summarily denied basic rights, including access to health care, formal employment, ownership and registration of real estate or private businesses, and banking or other financial services.

Imposing Russian sovereignty over Crimea also involved removing and replacing all of its ministries, institutions, organs, and symbols of Ukrainian state authority with Russian versions thereof—often employing the same officials and functionaries as before, provided they demonstrated loyalty to the occupying regime. For example, Chernomorneftegaz, a Crimea-based subsidiary of the Ukrainian state oil and gas company Naftogaz, was absorbed by the Russian-owned energy conglomerate Gazprom immediately following the annexation. Control of Chernomorneftegaz and of the exclusive economic zone in the waters surrounding Crimea gives Russia access to some 80 percent of Ukraine's underdeveloped oil and natural gas reserves in the Black Sea. In light of this, some analysts argue that resource extraction was one of the underlying motives of the Kremlin's colonialist drive to recapture Crimea.

The consolidation of Russian authority over Crimean institutions extends beyond those linked directly to the Ukrainian state. In October 2017, Russia's Constitutional Court upheld the uncompensated nationalization of dozens of privately owned businesses, properties, and industries in Crimea over the objections of their previous owners and of Russia's own Ministry of Justice.

Economic Disappointments

Since 2014, Moscow has pumped billions of dollars into the region's economy through subsidies and investments, dwarfing the volume of funding that Kyiv's much smaller federal budget could provide even before 2014. This is frequently touted as evidence of Russia's benevolent stewardship of Crimea.

Between a special development fund and direct subsidies from the Russian federal budget—which account for nearly 70 percent of the territory's own budget—Crimea had received roughly 1.43 trillion rubles (around $22 billion) in transfer payments from the federal government by March 2019. The Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol are now among the regions most financially dependent on the Russian state.

Most of the development fund has gone toward improving and expanding Crimea's infrastructure, with the lion's share (228 billion rubles) devoted to the construction of the massive Crimean Bridge linking the peninsula and the Russian mainland. Completed in December 2019, the 11-mile-long bridge crosses the choppy waters of the Kerch Strait, which had deterred past attempts to bridge Crimea and neighboring Krasnodar Krai. Since there was no way to reach Crimea from Russia by land without traveling through the Ukrainian mainland, the Kremlin fast-tracked the bridge's construction immediately after the annexation, despite logistical concerns.

Along with this massive influx of federal investments and subsidies, Crimeans were promised in 2014 that their wages, pensions, and living standards would rise beyond Ukrainian averages to meet Russia's much higher standards. The World Bank estimates that Russia's gross national income per capita was the equivalent of $25,330 in 2013—three times higher than Ukraine's, at $8,500—while the Russian average monthly pension amounted to about $285, compared with $160 in Ukraine. Many Crimeans therefore heralded "reunification" with Russia as deliverance from a bleak financial outlook under Ukraine. For some, these expectations were initially fulfilled.

In 2015 and 2016, I interviewed dozens of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Crimea now living in mainland Ukraine. Several spoke of increases in public-sector salaries and state pensions, immediately after the annexation, that doubled or tripled many people's previous earnings. However, in the words of one interviewee, these were temporary increases meant to "buy the loyalty" of the Crimean people; they were summarily reduced after 2014. In a notorious exchange between retirees and Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev during his visit to

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Crimea in May 2016, he dismissed complaints about the inadequacy of their monthly pensions with the blithe remark, "There is no money, but you hang in there!"

Overall, average income in Crimea has risen since the annexation, but after six years it still remains well below the Russian average. In February 2020, the average monthly income in Russia was around 47,000 rubles, while the average in Crimea was only about 32,000 rubles. And much of the increase has been negated by a decrease in Crimeans' purchasing power: prices of many goods have risen sharply since 2014 due to inflation, increased transportation costs, and international sanctions restricting trade with the occupied region. In 2015, Crimea was declared a Free Economic Zone with generous tax exemptions to incentivize domestic and foreign investment in the region, but foreign investment remains paltry due to the ongoing sanctions.

COSTS OF ISOLATION

The lives and livelihoods of average Crimeans have been directly affected in other detrimental ways as a result of the international response to Russia's annexation. Sanctions prohibit most credit card companies from operating in Crimea, severing many residents from their financial backstop, while the closure of Ukrainian banks on the peninsula left thousands without access to their savings. Despite the construction of a new airport in Simferopol—another project funded by Russia's development fund—sanctions prohibit international airlines from serving Crimea or even flying in its airspace, effectively preventing Crimeans from flying anywhere except within Russia. Crimean Federal University remains unaccredited by any international agency or institution, rendering a degree earned there essentially meaningless anywhere outside of Russia.

The 2014 annexation revived centuries of violent imperial policy.

The Ukrainian response to the Russian occupation has also had dire consequences for Crimea's residents. Initially, Kyiv did not completely suspend trade and transportation between occupied Crimea and the Ukrainian mainland, but the piecemeal imposition of new customs and immigration regimes on both sides of the de facto border nevertheless led to a gradual deterioration of Crimea's connectivity with the rest of Ukraine. Ukrainian rail service to the peninsula was suspended in December 2014, requiring travelers in either direction to cross the border on foot, severely complicating the journey. Beginning in September 2015, Crimean Tatar activists organized a grassroots blockade of all Ukrainian goods entering Crimea, prompting the Ukrainian government to issue a formal embargo on trade with the occupied territory by the end of that year.

Crimea had long relied on Ukrainian electricity and water passing through the narrow Isthmus of Perekop—Crimea's only land bridge to the mainland—but it was cut off from these resources following the annexation. In late 2015, Ukrainian activists destroyed power lines carrying hydroelectricity to Crimea, resulting in months of intermittent blackouts as local officials scrambled to make up the energy deficit. Starting in 2014, Ukrainian authorities restricted and ultimately suspended the flow of water from the Dnipro River into the Northern Crimean Canal—the peninsula's primary source of water for agricultural use—resulting in widespread drought conditions across northern parts of the territory and higher prices for local produce. Lower-than-average rainfall across Crimea has already made 2020 one of its driest years on record, threatening the region's supply of drinking water as well.

While some may blame Kyiv for the pain caused by these policies, Ukraine is under no obligation to provide resources or services to Crimea while it remains under Russian occupation. Ultimately, Russia's inability to provide Crimea with adequate resources is a reflection of the haste with which it seized the peninsula, and the illegitimate status of its rule there.

RUSSIFYING TRANSFORMATIONS

Some of the starkest changes that Crimea has undergone since the annexation are those related to its social and cultural environment, which has grown increasingly nationalistic. The retaking of Crimea was a watershed moment for Russian nationalism, and the peninsula has since been brandished as a defiant symbol of a reinvigorated sense of national pride. In 2014, "Crimea is Ours" (*Krym Nash*) became a popular refrain among Russian nationalists, used to taunt Ukrainian and Western critics of the annexation. Images of

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Crimea now grace Russian banknotes circulated throughout the country.

In many ways, Crimea has become a showcase for this nationalistic revival. Billboards bearing images of Putin and touting the region's glorious "reunification" with Russia are now ubiquitous. Since 2014, local officials have also erected numerous monuments to cultural and political figures from Russian and Soviet history, including key actors in Crimea's colonial experience, such as Empress Catherine II, Tsar Nicholas II, and, most troublingly, Joseph Stalin. The Soviet ruler has undergone something of a rehabilitation across Russia in recent years, but this has been especially prominent in Crimea. Stalin's image is deeply offensive to the Crimean Tatars, who remember their people's suffering from the 1944 deportation that he ordered.

In another manifestation of Russian nationalism rooted in Soviet nostalgia, Crimean children are increasingly subjected to "patriotic education" exercises that glorify the military and indoctrinate them with animosity toward Russia's perceived enemies—including Ukraine. As part of this reeducation program, children are dressed in military uniforms and paraded as political props during patriotic celebrations, particularly Victory Day—commemorating the Soviet triumph over Nazi Germany in World War II—normally celebrated on May 9, but postponed until June 24 this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While Crimea's youth are being primed for military service, the United Nations estimates that at least 21,000 young men from the territory had already been conscripted into the Russian military as of February 2020—a violation of international law, since most of the world considers Russia a foreign occupier. Crimea has undergone rapid militarization since 2014, in one of the clearest parallels to its colonial past. Establishing a military presence in the heart of the Black Sea region was one of the motives driving Russia's initial annexation of Crimea in the eighteenth century, and Russia maintained a limited naval presence in Sevastopol even after Ukraine became independent. Under its current occupation, Crimea has seen a dramatic influx of Russian military personnel and equipment.

Once limited by bilateral agreements with Kyiv to the port of Sevastopol, the Russian military has expanded to bases across Crimea. Its personnel in the region have nearly tripled, from 12,500 before the annexation to 31,500 as of March 2019. The numbers of Russian tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, aircraft, ships, and submarines stationed in Crimea have similarly multiplied during the same period, transforming the occupied peninsula into a heavily fortified military outpost. There are fears that the Kremlin may be preparing to deploy nuclear weapons to the peninsula as well.

In another clear echo of Crimea's prior experience of colonization, there has been an influx of Russian citizens taking up residency in the region since 2014. According to Russian state statistics, just over 140,000 citizens relocated to Crimea (including Sevastopol) from other regions of Russia between 2014 and 2018. However, this figure accounts only for those who officially transferred their residential registration to Crimea; it does not include Russian citizens who may reside permanently in Crimea but remain registered elsewhere. Crimean activists now located in mainland Ukraine estimate that the true number of recently resettled Russian citizens in Crimea is much higher—some unsubstantiated claims range as high as one million.

Coupled with the internal displacement of some tens of thousands of Crimeans to mainland Ukraine (the total number is nearly impossible to determine, but the minimum estimate is 20,000), this population transfer has precipitated a substantial shift in Crimea's demographic makeup. There are many ethnic Russians among the ethnic Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and other minorities who left Crimea for mainland Ukraine after the annexation, and those arriving from Russia are not all ethnically Russian. But the net increase of ethnic Russians has almost certainly brought their share of Crimea's population above the 60 percent or so that they accounted for before the annexation.

Regardless of ethnic affiliation, new arrivals from Russia are likely to support Moscow's claims to Crimea over Kyiv's, strengthening the Kremlin's grip on the peninsula. Just as the Russian Empire's colonizing strategy in Crimea involved the resettlement of Slavs to gradually transform the peninsula into a territory dominated by Russian language, culture, and identities, so, too, has the Russian Federation relied on population transfers to once again remake Crimea in its own image.

SILENCING DISSENT

Of all the developments in Russian-occupied Crimea over the past six years, the most egregious

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are the ongoing violations of the human rights of groups and individuals who express opposition to the occupation. Russian authorities in Crimea have routinely harassed, intimidated, fined, and imprisoned those perceived to pose a threat to the region's new status quo. A Russian law, implemented just two months after the annexation, criminalizes and heavily penalizes any speech or action aimed at violating the nation's "territorial integrity"—handing authorities in Crimea a powerful legal tool with which to silence voices of opposition.

But the silencing of critical voices began even before this law took effect. Among the first to face retribution for speaking critically of Russian actions in Crimea were journalists working for Ukrainian and independent media outlets. Just days after the seizure of Crimea in February 2014, Russian authorities moved swiftly to control the press by shuttering Crimea-based news agencies, blocking access to critical news sources from Ukraine and abroad, and establishing a homogeneously pro-Russian media landscape on the peninsula. Several Crimea-based journalists reported being targeted with personal attacks and intimidation perpetrated by both figures of authority and belligerent civilians. This atmosphere prompted an exodus of many Crimean journalists to mainland Ukraine.

Russia has relied on population transfers to remake Crimea in its own image.

Suppressing Ukrainian identities has been another key element of transforming Crimea back into a Russian colony. Although Crimea had been affixed to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic only in 1954, and ethnic Ukrainians were still a minority in the region even before the 2014 annexation, thousands of Crimeans nevertheless continue to speak the Ukrainian language—at least at home—and identify as Ukrainians on an ethnic and/or civic basis. But Ukraine and Ukrainian national identities are now routinely vilified in occupied Crimea: spurious threats of anti-Russian extremism and violent Ukrainian nationalism, allegedly stirred up during the Euromaidan Revolution, have calcified into the official narrative for why the Russian annexation was necessary and just.

Although Ukrainian remains an official regional language of Russian-occupied Crimea, its use is anathema in most places, and access to Ukrainian-language education and media has been almost entirely curtailed. Several Ukrainian-identifying Crimeans have been harassed, persecuted, or imprisoned for vocally opposing the annexation. The most prominent example was filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, who was arrested in May 2014 along with three other men on falsified charges of "terrorism" and held as a Russian political prisoner outside Crimea until his release in a September 2019 prisoner swap with Ukraine. The Russian occupiers thus routinely violate the very rights of Ukrainian Crimeans that they claim to be safeguarding for Russian Crimeans against the phantom threat of Ukrainian extremism.

INTERNAL EXILES

The rhetoric of "extremism" and "terrorism" has been deployed most aggressively against another opponent of the Russian occupation of Crimea—the Crimean Tatars. The Kremlin perceives them as an existential threat to Russian authority in Crimea for three main reasons: their long history of oppression and deportation at the hands of Russian and Soviet colonizers has steeled their resolve against accepting the occupation; they emerged during the Euromaidan as one of Crimea's most avowedly pro-Ukrainian communities; and their status as an indigenous people affords them a more powerful voice on the global stage and within certain international organizations. Adopting the West's language of antiterrorism and securitization, Russia has waged an appalling campaign of oppression against the Crimean Tatars, seeking to grind them into submission. After first heavily restricting the activities of the Crimean Tatars' representative body, the Mejlis, Russian authorities declared it an extremist organization in 2016, effectively outlawing the body and driving many of its leaders into exile.

The Crimean Tatars have been accused of extremism on religious grounds. Members of the international organization known as Hizb-ut-Tahrir—a nonviolent Islamic fundamentalist group outlawed for extremism in Russia but allowed to operate in Ukraine and many other countries—were rendered criminals overnight when the Kremlin claimed sovereignty over Crimea. Most fled to mainland Ukraine. Unannounced home raids, often resulting in arrests for alleged possession of "extremist" literature, are now routine for the tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars remaining in occupied Crimea, especially those who adhere to more

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traditional or conservative Islamic practices. Dozens of Crimean Tatars—mostly men—have gone missing or have been found murdered across Crimea since 2014.

Aside from a small but prominent number of exceptions deemed "collaborationists" by the rest of the community, the Crimean Tatars remain steadfastly opposed to Russian occupation and supportive of Ukraine's claims to the region. Enduring the Kremlin's oppressive regime, they understand it as only the latest iteration in a centuries-long cycle of colonization of their homeland.

Freedom House, a US human rights organization, now consistently rates Crimea as one of the least-free territories in the world, with an overall score of 8 out of 100 in 2020—placing it just above Somalia and Saudi Arabia, and well below Russia's own dismal score of 20. In response both to this erosion of rights and to the region's deteriorating economic conditions, tens of thousands of Crimeans have relocated to mainland Ukraine as IDPs. Resettling mostly in the cities of Kyiv and Lviv, the Crimean IDP population consists of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and other minorities who found living in Crimea no longer safe or viable under Russian occupation.

My own fieldwork among Crimeans in mainland Ukraine reveals that the IDP community is highly educated and younger on average compared with Crimea or all of Ukraine, and includes many people representing the region's cultural, educational, entrepreneurial, and political elite. Much of the Crimean Tatars' political leadership is now in exile on the Ukrainian mainland. The Mejlis operates out of a new headquarters in Kyiv. After its campus became the center of the newly consolidated Crimean Federal University, Tavrida National University—once Crimea's most prestigious—was reestablished in the Ukrainian capital as well. Through its IDPs and institutions, a Ukrainian Crimea thus lives on in some capacity on the mainland, while Crimea itself now suffers from a brain drain effect that will further hinder its prospects for development and prosperity as long as its most talented and educated residents remain in exile.

Imperial Project

While the 2014 annexation of Crimea was lauded in Russia and among its enablers abroad as the "reunification" of an estranged territory with the state to which it rightfully and "naturally" belongs, a historical perspective reveals it to be merely the resurrection of a centuries-long project of colonization. First annexed in the late eighteenth century and gradually transformed into a characteristically Russian territory through population transfers and the cleansing of its indigenous people and culture, Crimea is now experiencing recolonization after a brief respite under Ukrainian sovereignty.

Just as it did in centuries past, the Kremlin forcibly seized Crimea and precipitated a demographic shift by driving out its indigenous peoples and other opponents while encouraging an influx of its own citizens. Russia is remaking Crimea's social, political, legal, and economic order in its own image, and expanding its military presence in the region. New investment has principally gone toward accelerating integration with Russia, while average Crimeans have seen little to no improvement in their economic prospects despite promises to the contrary.

During a time of global upheaval and uncertainty, the Russian occupation of Crimea has understandably fallen out of the headlines. Nevertheless, it is important not to lose sight of the Kremlin's illegal and oppressive actions in Crimea and their historical context. This recolonization should not be normalized. ■

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