

A Communication and Conflict in Crimea

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Abstract

The recent conflict between Ukraine and Russia that erupted over the Crimean peninsula represents an ethnic conflict with the potential of growing into a war affecting thousands of people. This qualitative case study aims to answer the question: What communicative aspects of the Crimea conflict contribute to the difficulty in reaching a non-violent solution? The purpose of the case study is to provide insight into future international conflicts by revealing what communicative issues influence the ability of groups to solve disputes without violent means. This analysis identifies and explains the effects of key communicative aspects that contribute toward non-violent results. Significant concepts examined in the case study include incommensurate understandings of identities, face issues, power imbalances, and a tense climate. The concepts are then discussed in reference to possible solutions to the conflict, based on the particular challenges they present. The study focuses on communications from news coverage of events leading up to, and following, Crimea's separation from the Ukraine. The sample incorporates texts from multiple news organization sources, including the BBC, CNN, PBS, CBS, NBC, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. These news stories are examined in conjunction with historical background information on the region's cultural heritage and its past record of conflict as it relates to current interactions. It was found that the Ukrainian, Russian, and Tatar people maintain drastically differing understandings of identity, especially in relation to their feelings of ownership of the Crimean land. This difference strengthens concerns for face, preventing the groups from participating in efficient conflict communication. Further, this discrepancy results in drastic displays of unique forms of power, with a potentially volatile climate that works against successful conflict resolution in non-violent forms. The research indicates that non-violent conflict conversations must first address basic variations in understandings of the groups' differing identities in order to competently engage in discussion of larger issues.

Keywords: International Conflict, Communication Studies, Crimea

1. Introduction

As the world watched the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, with hopes of international cooperation and peace, the host country's neighboring nation, Ukraine, began to erupt in political violence and upheaval. The coastal Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, previously considered an "autonomous republic within Ukraine, electing its own parliament, with a prime minister appointed with approval from [Ukraine's capital] Kiev," became the trigger point for decades of tension between Ukraine, Russia, and native Crimean Tatars over the rights to the land.⁷ These three ethnically diverse groups, along with separate international forces supporting each of them, represent a key struggle for heritage and autonomy in the nation building process following large scale, worldwide conflict. This pattern of unrest in newly developing nations, between ethnic groups claiming rightful ownership over homeland, has repeated itself all over the world; for instance, between Israelis and Palestinians and between Bosnians and Serbs. Despite relative success in avoiding escalation over Crimea since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, like many other fledgling countries, fell prey to a series of triggering events and power plays that halted previous avoidance and negotiations. The Crimea conflict can provide crucial insight into which aspects of conflict identity, face, power, and climate tend

to push negotiation past peaceful compromise and collaboration, into competitive land grabs and border wars, offering a lesson for future debates over ethnic rights to land.

2. A History of Conflict

The fight over Crimea originated over two hundred years ago. Russia and the Ottoman Empire, two political powerhouses, vied for control of the Black Sea access, to which Crimea held a geographical position. Following a brief Russo-Turkish war, the countries signed the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, which gave several fortresses on the Kerch Peninsula with Black Sea access to Russia, while also establishing an independent Crimean Tatar state. The newly minted country only kept its freedom for nine years before Catherine the Great of Russia annexed the land. Following the annexation, Ottoman, French, and British forces challenged Russia's increasingly bold invasions of border countries by engaging in the Crimean War. Russia lost to the allied nations, and submitted to land loss in the Treaty of Paris, but retained control over Crimea until the Revolution of 1917, when the Tatars declared Crimea to be an independent democratic republic. Again, this independence was short lived, as the rise of the Soviet Union brought the land back under Russian control as a claimed "autonomous republic."^{1, 3}

The ethnic suppression carried out by Joseph Stalin crippled the remaining native Tatar population, as Russia forcibly deported 200,000 of their people to Serbia for "allegedly having collaborated with the Nazis during World War II." Crimea found itself downgraded from an "autonomous republic" to an "oblast," considered simply a region of the Soviet Union. Ukraine then received the area from the Soviet Union, reportedly as commemoration of Ukraine's submission to Russian rule. The Soviet Union reclaimed the land just before its disintegration, and Crimea once again came under Ukrainian control in 1991.¹

With three separate ethnic understandings of tradition, loyalty, and identity in the Crimean peninsula, the Ukrainian government in Kiev needed to account for a complex population of Ukrainians, ethnic Russians, and many Tatars who returned to their country from exile following the fall of the Soviet Union. In an attempt to solidify its new acquisition, the Ukraine pushed for the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, which held Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, to respecting the post-Soviet borders. Russia, however, received an extended lease on their key coastal military base in Sevastopol.¹

In 2004, the presidential race in Ukraine brought about the "orange revolution," as thousands of citizens dressed in orange publicly protested against election fraud carried out by Russian supported Viktor Yanukovich. His competition, Victor Yushchenko, eventually took office after a Supreme Court mandated re-election. The 2010 election, however, brought Yanukovich into office with significant "pro-Russian" voting support from Crimea and other Eastern Ukrainian districts. Over 70% of Crimea's population voted with Yanukovich, largely considered a reflection of Crimea's heavily Russian population, with 58.5% of the citizens identifying as Russian, compared to the 24.4% identifying with Ukraine, and 12.1% identifying as Crimean Tartar.^{6, 22}

In November 2013, Yanukovich announced his plans to suspend a trade deal with the European Union, in what the government asserted was an act to preserve Ukraine's "national security."⁴ The country decided instead to continue negotiations with Russia and a "trade bloc of former Soviet states," after Russia threatened detrimental trade sanctions against the Ukraine if it signed the deal with the EU.¹³ Citizens responded with slowly growing protests, occupying Kiev City Hall and Independence Square with up to eight thousand people. Following an economic agreement between Putin and Yanukovich, Parliament passed, and then annulled, restrictive anti-protest laws that resulted in several dead citizens. Independence Square became the main area for protests, which grew increasingly more violent, as eighty-eight people were killed on February 20th and 21st, 2014. After signing a compromise with opposition leaders on the 21st, Yanukovich disappeared and Parliament voted to remove him from power and hold new elections in May. From his self-imposed exile in Russia, Yanukovich insisted that he remained president. March 1st, 2014 brought the first direct involvement of Russian troops in the conflict, after the Russian parliament approved Putin's request to use military force in Ukraine to "protect Russian interests" in Crimea as "self-defense forces" for the largely Russian population of that region. Crimea's parliament followed this military action with a decision to vote on rejoining Russia with a referendum for the citizens, which passed by what the region's officials claim as a ninety-seven percent margin of victory.⁵

3. Methodology

The history of the Crimean conflict stands long and complex. In examining the factors that combined to result in the current conflict, both the past interactions, and the present, must be examined. This research applies three main theories from Conflict Studies, face and face threatening acts, power resources and tactics, and climate tension, to both past interactions and current ones, to identify the affect these major communication theories, combined with the background experiences of the Ukrainian, Russian, and Crimean Tartars with the Crimean region, have on current interaction. These significant issues are the primary focus of this research based on the results of research done by Gwendolyn Sasse, whose research on past conflict in the region suggest that these theoretical perspectives provide ways to examine the current issue in more depth.

Author Gwendolyn Sasse's crucial research on the region's past and the development of distinct cultural memories and ownership on the land provides a reference for discovering the effects of past heritage on modern conflicts. Sasse denotes an important difference between historical facts, here taken from historical documentation from *BBC History*, and a culture's rewritten memory of the events. Acknowledging this distinction offers insight into how the formation of the separate identities of the groups and different understandings of their rights to the land helps uncover what may keep groups from ever finding common ground in a modern conflict.

As conflict is "constituted and sustained by moves and countermoves during interaction," analyzing the actions and reactions, through the form of historic record and daily news reports and statements concerning the differing parties' responsive activities, provides an emergent pattern for communicative study.¹⁰ The more recent movements of the parties, leading up, and in response to Crimea's referendum to rejoin Russia, delineate how those preformed identities influence the access, use, and endorsement of power within the groups, between the groups, and between the three conflicting groups and other nations. These movements are taken from a sample of documentation in news coverage of events connected to the conflict, including texts from news sources such as the BBC, CNN, PBS, CBS, NBC, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. These sources were accessed online between March 26th, 2014 and April 28th, 2014. Keywords utilized during the search include: Crimea, history, conflict, culture, timeline, Tatars, Ukraine, Russia, military, international involvement, population statistics, and diplomacy. These news stories are examined in conjunction with historical background information on the region's cultural heritage and its past record of conflict as it relates to current interactions.

This study attempts to reveal how a past sense of cultural ownership and differing identities undeniably affects current conflicts through the process of interpreting the reasoning behind current actions and movements of the three differing groups.

4. Identity And Incommensurate Logics

Key to the understanding of the conflict in Crimea is the differing perceptions of identity of the Ukrainians, Russians, and Tatars in relation to the country. Social identity, the sense of identity we get from belonging to a larger social group, allows for the polarizing process of social categorization.¹⁰ This mostly unconscious practice of individuals defining themselves by identifying the groups they, and those around them, belong to, can lead to diverging interests and understandings between groups when they begin to determine which groups they do *not* belong in. Identification, thus, brings with it inherent acknowledgement of all of the oppositions that defer from their specific understanding of who the group is and how it functions in the world.¹⁰ In the Crimea conflict, each of the three main ethnic groups, over the span of several hundred years, created their own unique identity through "writing" their groups' history in the region. In her book, *The Crimea Question*, author Gwendolyn Sasse states that memory is a key way that people "locate themselves and others on a 'historical map.'"¹⁸ The intragroup understanding of the history of Crimea is a "malleable resource in the process of identity construction," which allows for each group to "refashion" historical memory to create continuity, authority, and legitimacy for a specific identity, while discrediting those that others create.¹⁸ Sasse asserts that the differing group identities create their own histories mainly through their chosen official symbols, monuments, and rituals.¹⁸

For the ethnic Russians in Crimea, much of their history carries the connotation of "gathering the Russian lands," with the vast territorial expansion as a natural part of Russian identity.¹⁸ Crimea, thus, stands as a region that is inherently Russian, not just dating back to the Soviet Union time period, but back into the conflict between the Ottoman Turks and the Russian Empire. In this view, the Crimean Tatars appear as "foreign occupiers raiding the region," not the ethnic group with the longest connection to the Crimean land.¹⁸ Russia utilizes its historical distaste

for the Ottoman Empire to tinge the Tatars' longtime stay in the area as one of foreign occupiers acting as agents of the Turks to keep the rightful occupants of the area, the Russians, from governing the region unconditionally. This Russocentric view puts all the past wars and conflicts for Crimea into efforts to unify and imperialize, and has maintained this view for several hundred years with the use of literary propaganda that like the book Krymskii al'bom, or Crimean Album. The yearly publication works to annually provide collections of writings that continue to emphasize the Russian legacy and involvement in Crimea. These writings, some about the history of the country and the current citizen makeup, never contain any mention of the Tatars.¹⁸

In the current conflict, this delegitimizing of the Crimean Tatar's right to the land takes form in absolute disregard for the needs of the 12.1% of the newly annexed region.²² President of the Crimean Tatar National Assembly, Refat Chubarov, was reportedly drowned out by a chanting Pro-Russian crowd at an attempted peace rally in Simferopol as he expressed the feelings of being a "minority in our homeland."¹¹ The Russian citizens of Crimea at the same rally, conversely, expressed feelings of being treated as "third-class citizens in Ukraine," and thus want to rejoin Russia, where their "roots lie." The Tatar voice is written off as inconsequential and illegitimate in the decision-making conflict because their ancestors did not have any special claim to the region.¹¹

The Tatars, on the other hand, resent the Russian view that they arrived in the Crimean region in during the late Mongol era, and thus lack legitimate claims as a "an indigenous group with a special right to the territory."¹⁸ Instead, the group identifies with heritage before that time, connecting them with the people that occupied the region long before the Mongol era through their Islamic religion. Where the Russians see their arrival into Crimea as a liberation of land they claim as their own, the Tatars see their arrival in as a "national disaster," resulting in wave of emigration of the Tatars to the Ottoman Empire due to Russian repression.¹⁸ Sasse points out, however, that this ingrained idea of homeland for the Tatars only actually became an integral part of their identity as a result of their denial to the region. In deporting the group from Crimea in the 1920s and refusing to allow the group back into the region created a "fused territorial and cultural identity" for the Tartars, desiring what they had categorically been denied. This helped solidify the group's intragroup cohesion while in exile.¹⁸ Resulting from this strengthening of ethnic ties to each other and the land, Tatar individuals began creating organizations of student societies, such as the "Fatherland Society," that began demanding the "liberation of the Crimean Tatar nation and independent statehood."¹⁸ This group played a crucial part in creating a national flag of the Crimean Tatar and the independent Crimean state, which integrated color references to their "pan-Turkish" background and a golden trident seal of the Crimean khans, seen by the Tatars as the first real group with claims to the land and their ancestry.¹⁸

This mindset of having the only inherent claim, especially as a small minority in the country with little political power, place the Tatar in an uneasy situation in the current conflict. Though small in numbers, the group is highly cohesive and determined to stay in Crimea, which reflects the deeply ingrained historical identity the group has created and perpetuated, so much so, that the Crimean leaders have been trying to push a law elevating the status of the Crimean Tatars as an "indigenous people's of the Ukraine."¹⁹ Ukrainian officials have shot down these attempts, a factor that causes a rift between the Tatars and the Ukrainians, despite that fact that most Tatars supported remaining a part of Ukraine. Tatar representative Mustafa Dzhemilev reportedly received proposals from the Russian officials in trading autonomy of Crimea if annexed by Russia in exchange for supporting the annexation cause, but the residing distrust of the Russians over the Tatar's forced emigration keeps the group offering support for the Ukrainian cause.¹⁹ Thus, the Tatar citizenry and organizations appear to be choosing their action based on their deep-seated identity desires to stay in their homeland.

Finally, Sasse asserts that Ukraine's identity in terms of Crimea focuses on tying Crimea to Ukraine both "historically and geopolitically."¹⁸ While some historians work to prove that the earliest Ukrainian ancestors were the first to live in Crimea, most focus on drawing comparisons between the struggle in oppression that both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatars experienced at the hands of Russia. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union deported both ethnic groups from their homeland. In creating this "bond" between the two groups, the Ukrainian government's acquirement of Crimea could be seen as "justified normalization," in the relations between the Ukraine and Crimea; for Ukrainian officials, the two countries seemed so alike, bringing Crimea into the fold seemed like a natural choice because of the shared experiences.¹⁸ Sasse cites "pseudo-historical accounts, shaped by political interests" as a tactic by the Ukrainian government to "underscore Crimea's 'rightful' place in Ukraine while playing down its demand or need for special status." In creating an imaginary brotherhood, the Ukrainian government can legitimize its actions to "protect" their apparent allies, along with their own citizens in the region.¹⁸

This identity as a "rightful protector" of the Crimean peninsula shows itself through the statements of both government officials and regular citizens of Ukraine. Official announcements by the Ukrainian Prime Minister asserts that Russia "wants to start World War III" and "wants to restore the Soviet Union," following their annexation of the Crimean peninsula.^{16, 21} These accusations paint the Russian government as one of war and tyranny, and allows for a bald-faced comparison of Ukraine's "self-protection" fighting and Russia's apparent "hostile takeover" violence. By

highlighting Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's open comparison of the Crimean conflict to Russia's war with Georgia, the Ukrainian government emphasizes Russia's past history of oppression and imperialism and its likelihood of returning to the days of the Soviet Union by collecting satellite countries under its fold.²¹ Normal citizens, too, feel the tug of deep-seated identity of having a kinship to other previously oppressed groups of people. Like their government officials, Ukrainians like Irma Krat, a journalist with strong nationalist ties who traveled to eastern Ukraine to "report on the region's [pro-Russian] separatists" despite great risk of being captured and detained by the group, believe it is Ukraine's role to fight for their country and their Crimean land.²⁰ These feelings are so strong, that many citizens risk their safety, like Krat who was held as hostage by the separatists, in the name of overcoming the Russian forces aimed at "reestablishing" its Soviet Union land holdings that their ancestors fought for in World War II.

These differing identities cannot be "mapped onto, expressed as, or reduced to the other[s]," and thus represent "incommensurate" realities.¹⁷ As all three ethnic histories have written themselves into the sole ownership of the Crimean peninsula, they fail to understand the logic for their competing parties' claims to the land. Neither the Russians, nor the Ukrainians consider the Crimean Tatars as "natives," in the region, and therefore do not acknowledge their status as a protected minority. The Ukrainians fail to understand the reasoning for the Russian government to annex the region based on a desire to have their own ethnic people properly represented for the 58.5% majority in Crimea, instead seeing this claim as a veiled tactic for reestablishing their imperialism in Eastern Europe.²² The Russian government lacks the belief system to comprehend Ukraine's deep-seated need to autonomy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, seeing their resistance to cede Crimea as an attempt to keep the ethnic Russians in the area a political minority and as a denial of control over a long fought for land.

As W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen W. Littlejohn describe in their book, *Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide*, "incommensurate moral orders" represent conflicts where the differing theories "by which a group understands its experience and makes judgments about proper and improper actions," clash between groups.¹⁷ Pearce and Littlejohn's work, much like Sasse's, is significant, in that it directly addresses how different past experiences cause groups to have entirely separate "languages" for understanding events, places, and people. For the Crimea conflict, the three prominent realities of the Ukrainians, Russians, and Crimean Tatars stand as three separate understandings of what is "common sense" and how such beliefs should be upheld. In order to differentiate and fully thresh out the issues held by the separate parties, the groups must attempt to find a common ground and "create" a new logic and belief system, or a new "language" that incorporates each ethnic group's view. The groups must attempt to separate the actual history of Crimea from the stigmatized versions passed down through various generations. This task is especially difficult with several hundred years of history before this specific conflict, but especially important for moving through the differentiation stage of conflict, where groups "raise the conflict issues and spend sufficient time and energy clarifying positions, pursuing the reasons behind those positions, and acknowledging their difference," and on to the integration stage of conflict to begin to explore possible solutions.¹⁰ The insight provided by Sasse and Pearce and Littlejohn concerning heritage and conflict communication set the stage for other communication theories on face, power, and climate, to be applied to current actions, through the lens of previously created and distinct group identities.

5. Face and Face Threatening Acts

The dissimilar understandings of the historical right to inhabit Crimea causes the separate ethnic groups of Ukrainians, Russians, and Tatars to have very strong, but very different understandings of their own "face." "Face," refers to "the communicator's claim to be seen as a certain kind of person [group]."¹⁰ This crucial concept in communication interaction was originally studied extensively by Erving Goffman, who wrote several articles concerning face issues between individuals. His work has since been expanded to take the concept of "face" beyond individuals, in this case, in application with countries. In particular, the ideas of "positive face" and "negative face" can be used to interpret the explanations behind conflicting countries reactions during turmoil. "Positive face," refers to a person's [group's] desire to gain the approval of others, while "negative face," refers to the desire of the individual [group] for autonomy or to "not be imposed on by others."¹⁰ These two facets of "face" play a crucial part in the moves and countermoves of all three of the ethnic groups.

"Positive face," is particularly important to the Ukrainians and Tatars, as they need the outside world and foreign leaders to support their image of rightfulness in the region and provide adequate military and monetary support against Russia's more powerful armed forces and economy. Having powerful supporters, such as the United States and the European Union, that believe in the ownership and control of Ukraine over Crimea, helps to legitimize the cause of the Ukrainian government as a wrongfully attacked nation. Backing by world powers provides the Ukraine self-

assurance among its people, as well as the strength of multiple military resources and international economic sanctions on Russia. This includes the “asset freezes and visa bans on seven Russian government officials and sanctions on 17 companies linked to [Russian] President Putin’s ‘inner circle’” by the United States, as of April 28th, 2014.⁸

For Russia, “positive face” holds more importance in relation to its own people’s support of the annexation move, as the country has the resources both militarily and economically to function without extensive support from outside countries. This lack of concern for international “positive face” needs is shown through the lack of withdrawal from the region by Russian officials in response to the newest U.S. sanctions, as they “brushed off any notion that they might change Russian policies.”⁸ Within the country’s population, however, the needs of “positive face” for the legitimacy of the Russian government’s actions are high, as Russia avoids placing real military troops too far into Ukraine’s border, and instead relies on Russian citizen separatists within the country to support Crimea’s annexation with force. Keeping the opinion of these specific citizens high remains crucial to the continued presence of Russian objectives directly in the country, without crossing the Ukrainian borders with troops and inciting a full-out war.²⁰

For the Ukraine and the Tatars, “negative face needs” also dominate their choices. To the Ukraine, their continued autonomy from Russia appeared threatened by their annexation of Crimea. Many officials asserted that they believed the Russians would not be content with just Crimea, and would attempt take over the Ukraine as well, in an effort to “restore the Soviet Union.”¹⁶ The government and citizenry consider their autonomy and freedom bitterly won through fighting in World War II and rallying politically to help push the fall of the Iron Curtain, which is a core reason that individuals, like the hostage and journalist Irma Krat, put their lives at risk to help retain this freedom. Krat’s actions to report on the Russian separatists reportedly stems from her national pride from her famous general father, Mykhailo Krat, who fought for Ukraine’s independence during World War II and the resulting feelings of being “distracted over the recent humiliations in of the Ukraine’s armed forces,” in response to the annexation of Crimea and the following movement of separatists in the eastern part of the country.²⁰

The Tatars, who have been repeatedly removed from the Crimean peninsula by force, hold their “negative face” autonomy needs in high esteem. As the smallest minority group in Crimea, their chances for total autonomy stand low, as they have already been refused native status by the Ukrainian government.¹⁹ Russia controlling the region, however, appears as a much larger threat to autonomy, as the Russians have a history of not only denying ethnic rights to the people, but also forcefully removing them from what they consider their homeland. The Ukrainian government, at the very least, acknowledges the Tatars’ desire to choose where they want to live, and thus have “consistently been pro-Ukraine and opposed to pro-Russian separatism on the peninsula.”¹⁹

These varying aspects of “face” all contribute to what actions the different ethnic groups see as “face-threatening acts (FTA)” that challenge or ignore identity claims and lead to “face loss,” which often results in defensive attempts to reestablish face.¹⁰ The largest and most predominant FTA is the trigger point in which Russia announced its plan to annex Crimea on a referendum vote. Here, both the Ukraine and the Tatars felt their “negative face” threatened, and responded with proclamations of illegality in the Russian move. Ukrainian officials asserted their country’s autonomy in deciding which actions its regions must follow through their political system, and denounced the Russian attempt at restraining Ukraine’s right to create and enforce their laws. This assertion of self-control over legal issues found support in a United Nations General Assembly resolution “declaring the Crimean referendum on March 16th illegal and affirming Ukraine’s territorial integrity.”⁵ Russia, on the other hand, has spent a large amount of time reestablishing its “positive face” belief that the annexation of Crimea took place in an effort to “protect Russian citizens.”⁷ This assertion of national concern for Russian blood works to spur on what the Russian government claimed were “Crimean ‘self-defense’” forces that first occupied Crimea prior to the annexation, as well as separatist movements of other ethnic Russians throughout the Ukraine.⁷ These groups’ beliefs that their ethnic protectors in Russia act to protect them and keep them represented in Ukraine pushes the separatists to continue to challenge Ukrainian authority. Refusing to back down on its decision to annex Crimea, despite the UN General Assembly resolution, acts as a “face-loss” prevention tactic for Russia’s resolve to protect its people at all costs.

The threats to “face” connected to ethnic identity present a serious problem for the conflict interaction. As Folger, Poole, and Stutman claim, the attempt to protect or repair one’s face has the potential for limiting “a party’s flexibility in taking new approaches to the conflict issue,” especially when the “face” issue is emotionally charged.¹⁰ Once these “face-saving” concerns surface in the conflict, “parties’ perceptions and interaction patterns can lead to progressive redefinitions of the conflict, which changes a potentially resolvable difference over some tangible problem into an unmanageable issue centering on the relationship between the parties and the images they hold of themselves.”¹⁰ If none of the ethnic parties take the risk of losing “face” in order to solve the conflict, the actual issues at hand, deciding on the best political, social, and economic options for the Crimean peninsula, get overshadowed by the additional “face” issue and go unresolved.

6. Power Resources and Tactics

Folger, Poole, and Stutman, in their textbook *Working Through Conflict*, define power as “the ability to influence or control events,” that belongs to the group.¹⁰ This means that social power “stems from the relationships among people,” and is only effective if the group as a whole endorses a resource used for power either consciously or unconsciously.¹⁰ Thus, the use of power hinges on the interaction between conflicting parties. The trio aptly stresses that a “resource only imparts power because it carries some weight in the context of relationships where it is used.” This connects once more to the work done by Sasse and Pearce and Littlejohn, and the emphasis on understanding how differing histories cause differing interests and thus, differing respect for certain power resources.

In the case of the Crimea conflict, for a single ethnic group to exert power, at least one of the other parties must endorse that resource or the ability to use it. Some groups, however, find their actions and power plays endorsed more often than others, due to the process of “social categorization.” This process creates strong presumptions about what types of people are usually powerful or weak, which helps certain parties gain endorsement of their actions more easily than others.¹⁰ For the Russian government, the “mystique” of their imperialistic strength and conviction tend to influence quick endorsement of power due to their reputation for pursuing their territorial desires with full force of political and military resources. Opposite on the spectrum of “social categorization,” the Tatars suffer from the label as a small minority population, with a history of being easily exiled from their chosen region. Ukraine rests somewhere in the middle, lacking a history of political dominance, but retaining key support from large world-powers such as the U.S. and E.U., which rewards them with legitimacy in their power moves.

Despite the presumptions provided by “social categorization,” the endorsement of a power resource “is always used in the context of a relationship,” and can be renewed, maintained, or reduced throughout interaction.¹⁰ The type of power tactics used, along with their timing and skillful implementation, can all affect the likelihood of a power move or resources’ endorsement. Four main types of power, “direct,” “direct and virtual,” “indirect,” and “hidden,” influence the probability of power endorsement in this specific conflict.¹⁰ “Direct” power usage is prominent in the Crimea conflict and the resulting violence. A blatant use of “direct” power occurred as Russia moved troops into Crimea following the annexation, storming a military base in Simferopol and killing one soldier in the process on March 18th. This blunt use of manpower to compel the Ukrainian government to withdraw its presence in Crimea gained endorsement as acting President Oleksandr Turchynov ordered the pullout of all Ukrainian troops from Crimea, despite their family members still residing in the region.⁵ Russia also utilized “direct and virtual” power tactics with various threats aimed at Ukraine, including the warning of cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine if Kiev failed to pay off its debts to Russia, which Ukraine endorsed through their continuance to make payments.¹⁰

Ukraine responded with their own “direct” power tactics, with President Turchynov announcing the start of an “anti-terrorist operation” against pro-Russian separatists gathering in Eastern Europe and occupying government buildings.⁵ Russia, however, officially avoided endorsing the move, claiming that the militants were not actually part of the Russian military. The separatists themselves also diminished the endorsement of the anti-terrorist groups by seizing six armored vehicles of the force and illegitimizing the strength of the operation. Ukraine utilized its foreign supporters to offer “direct and virtual” threats as well, in form of various economic and political sanctions from the U.S., E.U., and the U.N.⁸ But again, the Russian government refused to endorse the threats, and continued amassing troops just outside of Ukraine and supporting the separatists’ movement.⁵

The most blatant use of “indirect” power to shape interaction, without ever making the use of power explicit, came in the form of Russia strategically resisting negotiation talks with U.S. and Ukrainian officials by refusing direct meetings with its foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov. In the missed attendance of the high-ranking official at the talks, Russia controlled the likelihood of a real solution with concrete results, as no action could be taken without the consent of the foreign minister and his direct connections to Putin. The U.S. attempted to avoid explicitly endorsing the “indirect” power usage, as Secretary of State John Kerry “sought to play down the absence of a meeting [with Lavrov],” by stating “I had no expectation, zero expectation, that today that kind of meeting would take place.”¹² Ukraine, on the other hand, did endorse the absence in telling reporters to “Ask Lavrov,” when questioned about why he and Lavrov had not met.¹²

The power differences between Ukraine, Russia, and the Tatars remain complex as the conflict unfolds. While Russia is the larger country territorially, economically, and militarily, Ukraine and the Tatars have the support of most of the major world power organizations, including the E.U. and the U.N. Despite this, Russia appears to have a slight advantage due to proximity, as their actions can immediately be carried out on its close neighboring country, while the foreign countries that support the Ukraine must overcome moderate to large distances to establish any response on the part of the smaller country. This imbalance of power, like most others, “poses a serious threat to constructive conflict resolution,” as the “weaker” party feels threatened and is more likely to respond with a drastic response, which can result in a perpetuating escalation of conflict and violence.¹⁰ Russia’s reputation for responding in kind to any

attack, along with their ability to work behind the scenes to achieve their goals without triggering official reactions of other countries, acts as an implicit, “hidden” threat that decreases the likelihood of drastic moves made by the weaker part and its allies.¹⁰

7. Effects of Climate

Climate also acts as a key factor for understanding the overall “feeling or pervasive sense” of the way a conflict should and will go.¹⁰ The predictions made ahead of time as to how we think a certain conflict should feel influence the way we act within it, creating a self-perpetuating situation based off a presumption. Although climates tend to be enduring and difficult to change, the nature of climate hinging on interactions allows opportunities to break patterns and slowly change the climate. The interactive nature of climates means that a climate “cannot be reduced to the beliefs or feelings of an individual,” but is experienced in common by the party members.¹⁰

In the Crimea conflict, previous experience of Russia invading another country deeply influenced the climate of the situation from the start. In 2008, Russia backed separatist Georgians with military power, sparking a five-day war that resulted in previously Georgian controlled Abkhazia and South Ossetia being recognized as independent republics of Russia. Russia claimed the action as “a difficult choice, but an only way to save the peoples’ lives.”² This precedent of using force to “liberate” ethnic Russians clouded the assumptions on the climate of the situation for all parties involved. Russia and the ethnic Russians in Crimea acted aggressively, seeing their past success as an indicator for surety in their current move. This aggressive climate, paired up with worry for safety on the part of Ukrainians concerned with the integrity of the country’s remaining regions, combined to create an overall feeling of volatility. The injustice felt by both sides, with the Russians feeling that their kin had been mistreated and the Ukrainians feeling the Russians illegally annexed their territory, creates a pattern of harmfully aimed reciprocity to any actual or perceived slight. Following the apparent discovery of two Ukrainian men, one a local politician, “tortured to death,” Ukraine’s acting president ordered the relaunch of military operations against pro-Russian militants in the eastern parts of the country, despite a tenuous Geneva agreement between the two countries.⁵ Likewise, the U.S.’s most recent sanction announcement resulted in a pro-Russian separatists attack on a peaceful demonstration of Ukrainian citizens, who were beaten with batons and stones.¹⁴ Thus, the climate appears to be one of reciprocating actions to any offending act.

The tendency to reciprocate, or “respond in a similar direction to another party’s behaviors with behaviors of comparable functional value,” is a crucial part of all social exchanges, and is particularly harmful if the actions are violent and escalatory.¹⁰ To break the chain of interactions based on serving damaging retribution, one party needs to offer a compensatory accommodation with the opposite, peaceful functional value, as “a compensating response to a negative act can break a destructive cycle and turn the conflict in more positive directions.”¹⁰ Being the first country in the conflict to “turn the other cheek,” however, comes with the risk of showing vulnerability that none of the ethnic groups involved prefer to allow.

8. Discussion

With the identification of several communicative theories that highlight potential problems in the conflict, the question remains what might be done to counter these ill effects. A potential third-party intervener would need to take each of the discussed aspects of conflict into account while attempting to aid the three ethnic groups in finding a solution. Out of the many options for types of dispute resolution, including representative negotiation, settlement facilitation, mediation, and arbitration, one stands out as most advantageous for this particular conflict: mediation. What mediation offers that the other types of dispute resolution lack is a goal of “empowering the parties to collaborate in making appropriate decisions.”⁹ This goal allows for each party to be fully invested in the process, as well as the outcome, and expands the problem beyond a solution to dealing with the actual relationship itself, which can help future interaction between the parties. The mediator, however, would need to be one that can hold the differing sides accountable to their self-determined decision once they reach it. This aspect of the agreements would be especially important to the Ukrainian and Tatar parties, since their weaker status economically and militarily put them at greater risk to suffer if the agreement falls through. While the U.S. tends to take the role of mediator for many international conflicts, the U.N. might be a better option, as the coalition makeup represents the interest of hundreds of countries, not just the U.S., which has the opportunity to mediate along the lines of its own interests.

A crucial first step for any mediation over this issue would be to attempt to create a “new language” between the largely incommensurate views of the parties. Pearce and Littlejohn recommend the use of what they call “transcendent discourse,” which goes beyond that of “normal discourse,” in the sense that it can lead to “the possibility of constructive dialogue, new contexts in which to understand differences, and new ways to compare and weight alternative choices.”¹⁷ This strategy focuses more on suspending insults in the process of probing the real problem, without persuasive intentions, resulting in an overall critique of the situation and areas of improvement. Incommensurate moral conflicts are challenging because each side inherently believes their mindset stands superior over the other, which brings serious face threats into play. To counter-act this emotionally heightened climate, using “transcendent discourse” can push conflicts to “be argued in more humane, enlightening, and respectful ways.”¹⁷ A nonjudgmental setting can allow a common ground or new reality to be built, resulting in an opportunity to focus on the actual issues, and not just the positions each side hold according to their identity.

In addressing face issues specifically, a mediator for this conflict would need to pay close attention to when the individual parties seem to be using “face-saving” alignment actions. If one party uses an account, such as an excuse, to defend their actions, the mediator can see that the specific issue is one that the party feels an extra need to defend, because it is related to their face. Folger, Poole, and Stutman point out three specific frames that parties hold in trying to defend their face. In specific, the “resisting unjust intimidation,” frame for saving face will most likely affect both Ukraine and the Tatars, as the smaller parties want to assert their clout as a nation or group that will not be bullied by Russia.¹⁰ For Russia, the “stepping back from a position” frame seems applicable, as the Russian officials asserted on multiple occasions that they had not intended on invading the rest of Ukraine, but appear to feel uneasy in pulling back and looking weak when the separatists supporting their country continue to push for action.¹⁰

Key actions to reduce the face-threats held in those frames include reducing defensiveness by having all sides indicate an understanding of the other’s position for not wanting to seem weak. Further, the use of a “reformed sinner” or “tit-for-tat” approach, in offering a conciliatory action to the opposing party’s aggressive one, can show a willingness to concede certain proponents in exchange for positive reciprocity.¹⁰ A good strategy for this on an international scale is the “Graduated and Reciprocated Initiative in Tension Reduction strategy.”¹⁰ The eight-step process designed for conflict between nations focuses on making the initiative of an action clear, with some pressure to reciprocate the conciliatory move, but still giving the other party the choice to participate on an equal level.¹⁰ This strategy works to acknowledge face needs, while not sacrificing a usable solution to the problem.

Similarly to working with face in a conflict, a mediator’s first step in handling power in a conflict is to identify when power is being used and by who. This can be done by determining if a power resource is one that belongs to the group, or to a particular party, while also trying to assess which group expresses the most uneasiness in changing the status quo, as they are often most likely to be the party with the most power in the current situation.¹⁰ Once the mediator locates the power resources, the next step is to foster shared power between the parties. This can be done for fostering shared goals, such as protecting ethnic kin, as well as making parties aware of how endorsement works to continue the legitimacy of a power resource, such as Ukraine’s continual payment to Russia for their debts after Russia’s gas cutoff threat. A key tactic for pushing shared power in this situation could be the encouragement of the lower power members, like Ukraine, the Tatars, and other small eastern European countries, to band together to counterweigh the power of the Russia. In doing so, the playing field of resources comes closer to equal, which might force more endorsement by Russia to the other nations.¹⁰

9. Conclusion

The Crimea conflict contains complex identity differences that foster issues of face, power, and climate between the parties. Combining studies done by Sasse and Pearce and Littlejohn, which acknowledge the differing individual frameworks created by the groups from the rewriting of history, with classical theories on communication in conflicts, allows for international clashes to be more thoroughly understood, and avoid major pitfalls collaborating toward finding a suitable solution for all parties. The ongoing struggle over the Crimea region resembles several past ethnic disagreements that ended in severe bloodshed and full-out war. The Crimea conflict offers the international community a chance to utilize dispute resolution tactics to learn how to better avoid violence, and instead foster collaboration between groups with incommensurate views. Whether the conflict proliferates into a war between Ukraine and Russia, or another World War, depends on efficient uses of conflict management and the parties’ willingness to participate in the process. While conflict theory alone cannot save the parties from war, it can contribute to the probability of non-violent resolution that fits most, if not all, of the parties’ needs.

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