The OSCE in Crimea

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How significant has the OSCE been in preventing intra-state ethnic conflict in the post-Soviet region? According to one popularly held viewpoint, the OSCE has played an invaluable role in this regard. An often-cited positive example of the OSCE’s achievements in conflict prevention has been its involvement in Crimea, with specific reference to the activities of the OSCE Mission to Ukraine and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Supporters of this view refer to the OSCE-sponsored round tables, the quiet diplomacy of the HCNM among the disputants, the formal recognition of Crimea’s autonomous status in the June 1996 Ukrainian constitution and the absence of violence in Crimea to argue the contribution of the OSCE in preventing conflict in Crimea.

This article challenges this view and presents an opposing position. While it disputes neither the OSCE’s activities in Crimea nor that conflict has as yet been prevented, it questions the extent to which the OSCE has influenced this outcome. The article argues that the OSCE has played a minor role and supports this argument with the results of an examination of the OSCE’s impact on the prevention of conflict in Crimea. These results are based on a comparison of the OSCE’s impact with other actors and factors involved in the prevention of conflict in Crimea. They are also based on a comparison of the potential for conflict after the intervention of the OSCE with that prior to its intervention. Thus, factors other than the OSCE can be shown to have influenced the prevention of conflict on the Ukrainian peninsula. The article also concludes that, while the overall potential for conflict in Crimea has diminished since the OSCE’s intervention in February 1994, specifically with respect to Crimea’s status in Ukraine, the potential for its escalation remains and the situation in Crimea demands our continued attention and concern.

Background

In the period prior to the February 1994 intervention of the OSCE, the potential for conflict on the peninsula was significant and was based on several explosive issues. First, the Crimean Russians were campaigning for Crimea’s separation from Ukraine and reunification with Russia. Second, the Crimean Tatars were campaigning for political recognition as the indigenous peoples of Crimea and for integration into Ukrainian society and economy following their forced deportation to Central Asia in 1944. Finally, the Ukrainian government in Kyiv vehemently opposed Crimea’s secession from Ukraine and rejected any level of autonomy for the peninsula that threatened Kyiv’s sovereignty. It also denied that the Crimean Tatars were an indigenous group; thus, they did not merit any special political recognition or protection beyond that offered to other national minorities in Ukraine. While Kyiv acknowledged the tragedy of the 1944 deportation, it insisted that all had been done that can be done to facilitate the integration of the Crimean Tatars as full, contributing members of Ukrainian polity and society.
The potential for violent ethnic conflict in Crimea on the basis of these issues was heightened by several events. In February 1992 the Supreme Soviet of Crimea declared the peninsula the ‘Republic of Crimea’ and began preparation of a constitution supporting Crimea’s sovereignty from Kyiv. In May 1992, the Crimean Parliament passed the Act of Independence of Crimea and adopted a Crimean constitution which established Crimea’s relationship with Ukraine on the basis of treaties and agreements, much as between sovereign states. Following this, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (the Ukrainian Parliament) cancelled Crimea’s separatist constitution and repeatedly ordered the Crimean Parliament to bring Crimea’s legislation in accordance with Ukraine’s. In a December 1992 newspaper interview, a deputy of the Crimean Parliament, O. Kruglov, called for an armed struggle against Ukrainian rule in Crimea. The January 1994 Crimean presidential elections were held against a background of strongly pro-Russian chauvinistic demonstrations and were won by Yuri Meshkov, leader of the ‘Rossiya’ bloc which advocated Crimean unification with Russia, with 72.9% of the votes. Indeed, there were reports that Russian Cossacks were prepared to render armed assistance in the event of a conflict arising from these elections. In May 1994, another draft of the Crimean constitution reinstated separatist elements, such as Crimean citizenship.

Furthermore, at daily demonstrations at the Crimean Parliament in Simferopol, the Ukrainian flag would be torn up by the assembled crowds and aggressive, negative statements would be made against anyone opposed to Crimean independence and supporting Ukrainian policies. Violence broke out between the Crimean Tatars and local armed groups in October 1992 whereby Crimean Tatars, having failed to receive authorisation to build resettlements and housing, had their houses torn down by local authorities and the militia, resulting in almost 30 Tatars being seriously injured.

Consequently, fears mounted of a violent ethnic conflict in Crimea. References were made by Ukrainian parliamentarians that the ‘situation in the peninsula is approaching that in Transnistria’ and to ‘... remembering hundred [sic] of victims in Transnistria’. In May 1994 the Ukrainian President reaf-

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3 Ibid., p. 57.
4 The next closest candidate with 23% was Mykola Bagrov, Speaker of the Crimean Parliament and considered a moderate who supports Crimean autonomy within Ukraine. Ibid., pp. 72-73.
5 Ibid., p. 72.
6 Ibid., p. 18.
7 Ibid., p. 49.
8 Ibid., p. 11. The situation in Trans-Dniester, involving ethnic Russians seeking separation