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Situational Analysis Case Study

Kherson region

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Abbreviations

ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
DUMU	*Dukhovne upravlinnya musul'man Ukrayiny* (Clerical Board of Ukraine's Muslims)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
TIKA	*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı* (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency)

Checkpoint from the occupied Crimea, Chonhar, Henichesk district, Kherson oblast, Ukraine © Parshina Irina 2018

1. Introduction

Five years on after the conflict in the east and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine continues to face a number of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Against this backdrop, concerns for Ukraine's integrity feature highly in the national discourse and are echoed by some international observers.

This case study presents a conflict analysis of three *hromadas* (districts)[1] in the south of Kherson oblast, just north of Crimea: Kalanchak, Chaplynka and Genichesk. The region has a population of just over 1 million, with the three districts comprising just over a tenth (Kalanchak: 21,000; Chaplynka: 35,000; Genichesk: 60,000).[2]

The region was selected for the following reasons: proximity to the administrative boundary line with Crimea (a de facto international border) with a checkpoint in every district; geographical remoteness from Kyiv and thus away from the influence of Russia; high numbers of ethnic and religious minorities; agricultural economy; and a long history of patriarchal traditions.

This case study forms part of an analysis of three regions in Ukraine: Kherson, Odesa and Zakarpattia. The common findings from each region are summarised in a synthesis report, which also proposes peacebuilding recommendations.

1   *Hromada* is a Ukrainian term for a 'territorial commune'. Although currently not formal administrative units, *hromadas* have certain self-governance responsibilities and are at the heart of decentralisation reform. See: Poroshenko suggests granting status of regions to Crimea, Kyiv, Sevastopol, creating new political subdivision of 'community', Interfax Ukraine, 26 June 2014, https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/211043.html.

2   http://www.ks.ukrstat.gov.ua/demografichna-ta-sotsialnaya-politika/1729-1-4-naselennya-ta-migratsiya/979-chiselnist-naselennja-na-pochatok-misjacja-ta.html

2. Methodology

In October and November 2018, a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in three *hromadas* of the Kherson oblast: Chaplynka, Genichesk and Kalanchak. The qualitative study draws on views and experiences of 54 respondents, of which 25 people (14 men and 11 women) were interviewed individually and 29 (17 women and 12 men) participated in focus group discussions. Depending on the respondents' preferences, the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian.

The respondents were sampled from a wide range of professional and social backgrounds, and included: local government officials and deputies; representatives of education, health, cultural and social services; businesspeople; journalists; and civic activists. They identified with diverse (majority and minority) ethnic and religious groups present in the region and represented different age categories (25–60 years).

Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the pre-election political environment, all participants have been anonymised.

Based on a relational (referring to the social construction of masculinities and femininities) and intersectional (as systems of power shaped by other identities)[3] approach, the methodology included questions on gender dynamics to ensure gender was mainstreamed through the research. This allowed for the most prominent gender issues to be highlighted. However, a more focused methodology is required to uncover deep-rooted gendered drivers and effects and find ways to help to overcome a lack of interest in gender issues among local stakeholders (a fact brought to light during this project).

The study also included desk research and a review of literature, including media reports (including social media); and documents of national and local authorities and statistical bodies.

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3 H. Myrttinen, N. Popovic and L. Khattab, 'Measuring gender' in peacebuilding: Evaluating peacebuilding efforts from a gender-relational perspective, London: International Alert, 2016, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_MeasuringGenderPeacebuilding_EN_2016.pdf; S. Tielemans, Gender & conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders, London: Conciliation Resources, 2015, https://www.c-r.org/downloads/CR%20Gender%20Toolkit%20WEB.pdf

3. Context Analysis

Following the **annexation** of Crimea in 2014, the south of Kherson oblast became a de facto border region. Russian **troops** deployed in the north of Crimea close to the border regularly carry out overt displays of military and naval power, which have detrimental effects on business, tourism and the local population's mental wellbeing.

Economic ties with Crimea have been severed and the flow of goods between Crimea and Kherson oblast has dramatically decreased. Local residents who continue to work in Crimea face difficulties and security risks when travelling to the peninsula. The growth of the agricultural sector, however, provides new livelihoods.

The three studied *hromadas* have different characteristics, but Genichesk is particularly **isolated** from the regional centre and has poor transport links. Therefore, while Kalanchak and Chaplynka benefit (somewhat) from the economic and educational opportunities afforded by **Kherson**,[4] Genichesk does not. Speaking to civil society representatives and journalists in Kherson, it was observed that many are **not familiar** with the situation in Genichesk, a further indicator of its isolation. However, some respondents from Genichesk said they feel that social deprivation has been improving with the decentralisation reform and international assistance programmes.

The region's **information landscape** is dominated by Russian media, particularly television and online platforms based in Crimea. These channels target the Kherson oblast, with the content tailored around local and national Ukrainian issues.

The events of 2014 led to an influx of **Crimean Tatars** into Kherson oblast. Most of them have since moved on to more prosperous regions of Ukraine or abroad due to poverty and unemployment, social deprivation and the fear of Russia's further advancement into the region. According to a local expert, fewer than 200 families have settled in Kherson oblast, most of whom are concentrated in Genichesk. However, the immediate pressure on social, health and education services, as well as malicious propaganda and lack of conflict-sensitive support, has fuelled xenophobic attitudes and stirred up discontent among the host population. The growth of the Crimean Tatar community has also led to a change in the dynamics with Kherson oblast's 'other Muslims' – the **Meskhetian Turks**.

Paramilitary groups, partly formed of ex-Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) (now known as the Joint Forces Operation)[5] veterans and the private militias of oligarchs, are used widely for settling disputes, mostly over land and harvests. Well-established and -resourced paramilitary groups in Kherson oblast have a significant impact and move easily from one district to another. However, their influence is much weaker in Genichesk due to its remoteness and poor transport links.

Gender relations are patriarchal in all communities, resulting in a curtailed freedom of movement for women; for example, women are often not permitted by their husbands to travel to Kherson for training or other activities. The status of women in Meskhetian Turk communities is particularly low, as their integration into wider Ukrainian society is limited – they are traditionally confined to roles within the home. Among Crimean Tatars the status of women is higher than in Meskhetian Turk communities; for example, the deputy head of the state administration of Genichesk was a Crimean Tatar woman.

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4   By 'Kherson' we mean the city of Kherson, the administrative centre of Kherson oblast. 'Kherson oblast' is identified by the word 'oblast'.
5   V. Zimmerman, What does Ukraine's new military approach toward the Donbas mean?, Atlantic Council, 15 May 2018, https://www. atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-does-ukraine-s-new-military-approach-toward-the-donbas-mean

Preparation of local folklore groups, in Kherson, Ukraine © Parshina Irina 2018

As elsewhere in Ukraine, the Euromaidan movement stimulated the development of **civil society**. Since 2014, even in the least socially active rural areas, volunteer and ex-ATO veterans' organisations have appeared. However, despite the large number of registered civil associations and organisations, only a small number are active and largely depend on the activism of a single, leading individual. Additionally, there are blurred lines between some local civil society organisations and political and business circles, which creates an unhealthy dynamic due to the lack of civil society's independence.

4. Key Conflict Dynamics

Mutually reinforcing conflict dynamics can be discerned in three main areas:

- **land-related disputes** between large and medium-sized agricultural producers over lease rights and conditions, as well as harvests;
- **competing politics and identities** of the 'old' (post-Soviet, Russia-influenced) and 'new' (post-Maidan, pro-European) systems; and
- **confrontational relations with ethnic and religious minorities**, particularly with Muslim communities.

4.1 Land- and property-related disputes

The region is largely agrarian and access to cultivable land is highly prized. **Agrarian oligarchs** or 'land barons' play a significant role in communities. Extremely rich (with private lakes, zoos, as well as militias) and powerful, they have immense control over economic relationships, local politics and security.

Conflicts over land or harvests result from inadequate legislation regulating the land market, the insufficient protection of landownership rights and disposal, and the lack of and improper registration[6] of cultivated land. Cultivation of **non-registered land** is widespread and used for tax evasion, as harvest from such land is not registered.

The farming of unregistered land often makes it a target of **raiders (harvest robbers)**. In the last three years, there have been dozens of raids. The police has managed to bring this issue under control in recent months – local respondents felt that the number of raids has dropped since its peak in 2016. The most common incidents were attempts to gather someone else's harvest, often involving paramilitary groups operating under an ATO banner.

Within the black market for land, **disputes between agricultural businesses** over land leases are commonplace, as are **disputes between leaseholders and landlords** over rental rates. For the most part, landowners and local communities are indifferent to disputes between large and medium-sized agricultural producers. However, when locals are not only leaseholders of land shares but also employees of the same farms/producers, the situation is different. For example, in a recent (late 2018) case in the village of Nadezhdivka in Chaplynka, neither side had a legal right to the land, however, the winning party was the one that mobilised the local community/shareholders to engage in violent confrontation with the competitor. According to a journalist in Kherson oblast, "both sides used the services of one of the numerous criminal groups".[7]

Along with other remedies (court, local authorities, protests), disputes over land and property are also solved with the use of force. This has created a **market for private security groups** (i.e. security guard companies and paramilitary groups formed of **ex-ATO** veterans). They are closely affiliated with **ultra-right political groups** and even criminal groups. The market also seems to be an **ethnic business niche** dominated by Azerbaijanis and Chechens.[8] Some of these groups run a protection racket on farmers (for example, the *Kordon* [Ukrainian for

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6   Land registration has been a lingering issue since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when members of collective farms (*kolkhozes*) automatically became landowners. However, as many of them failed to register their plots with the land register, the official status of these plots is still unclear.

7   Journalist, interview by a local researcher, Kherson, November 2018

8   Azerbaijani and Chechen communities have been settled in the region since the 1990s. Studying the roots of the ethnic violence groups, however, was beyond the scope of this research.

Cordon] group in Kalanchak). The National Corps[9] (although under different guises) mobilises its members to participate in land- and property-related confrontations.

Over the last three years, the involvement of former ATO combatants and **'professional veterans'** in these groups has become widespread. These groups act as the guardians of local elites' interests. Among other factors, such as the lack of economic opportunities and unemployment, this is a direct result of the poor quality and ineffectiveness of reintegration programmes for ex-combatants. When it had just been formed, the now infamous Torbin's group (led by Sergey Torbin, a former police officer) tried to find its niche in legal markets. However, due to a lack of opportunities, the group turned to criminal services, "specialising in contract killing", as according to a local expert.[10] Torbin is believed to have taken payment to undertake the fatal acid attack on anti-corruption activist Kateryna Gandzyuk.[11]

However, it is important to note that most Donbas veterans return to 'normal' civilian life (although not without challenges)[12] and create organisations that advocate for their rights (including land-related rights), and social and tax benefits. Indeed, such organisations are common in the post-Soviet space and originate from the Second World War veteran groups, later followed by organisations of veterans from the Afghan war, Chernobyl and Chechnya. The social capital of these people has always been high.

4.2 Competing political ideologies and identities

Although most people hold **strong local identities** (village or community level) above all others, tensions around political identity and choices of 'civilisation' (crudely described as **'pro-Russian' versus 'pro-Ukrainian'**) affect local politics, relationships and even business. Curiously, this is *not* determined by ethnicity but rather by class, education, and social and economic status. A familiar divide exists between the pro-Ukraine (and pro-European) middle-class (educated, economically stable, middle-aged, socially active) and rural (uneducated, low-income) populations. Genichesk is particularly affected by this dynamic, as a higher percentage of its population leans towards Russia. Events in the spring of 2014 (a period of pro-Russian unrest in parts of Ukraine) had higher resonance as communities appeared to be divided more starkly. Another controversial case was the Immortal Regiment[13] public initiative, a Russian public movement celebrating the heroes of the Second World War, which was interpreted by local activists as pro-Russian. 'Pro-Ukraine' volunteers and activists protested against the initiative, accusing the authorities of sponsoring or at least succumbing to pro-Russian forces. Pro-Ukraine activists organised counter protests that almost ended in clashes. In Chaplynka, an organisation of Second World War veterans became a semi-legal branch of the forbidden Communist Party, as pro-Communist views are still popular in parts of the region.

Apathy (i.e. political and social passivity) is widespread in the three districts – people define their area of responsibility as limited to their household. As a result, these people are very vulnerable to **manipulation by local powerholders and are a target of Russian propaganda**. People are constantly barraged with depressing information about how they are suffering under the Ukrainian authorities, the Ukrainian army (that arrived in the

9   C. Miller, In Ukraine, ultranationalist militia strikes fear in some quarters, Radio Liberty, 30 January 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-azov-right-wing-militia-to-patrol-kyiv/29008036.html

10   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson, November 2018.

11   C. Miller, Ukrainian activist doused with acid dies, Radio Liberty, 4 November 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-activist-doused-with-acid-dies/29581875.html

12   For more information on the gendered reintegration of former combatants in Ukraine, see Alert's forthcoming policy brief, developed as part of the 'Peace Research Partnership' project.

13   S. Prokopeva, Russia's Immortal Regiment: From grassroots to 'quasi-religious cult', Radio Liberty, 12 May 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-immortal-regiment-grassroots-to-quasi-religious-cult/28482905.html

region with the 'new border') and 'the Muslims'. The contrast between 'orderly, modern, rich Russia' and 'backward, chaotic, poor Ukraine' presented by the Russian media is demoralising members of the local population and strengthening pro-Russian sentiment.

"The Hungarian dream, Polish dream, Turkish dream are not for me – but I can have a Russian Dream…"

While open confrontation along political identity lines is low (or not very visible), respondents believe that, underneath ostentatious public displays of loyalty to the Ukrainian state, some local politicians harbour pro-Russian views and "might be used [manipulated by Russian interests] at some point".[14]

4.3 Ethnic and religious relations

The triangle of tensions between Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks and the Ukrainian majority complicates the already complex local dynamics. The size of the Crimean Tatar and Meskhetian Turk communities is similar, however, there is almost no contact between these Muslim communities (the largest Muslim communities in the region). They do not seem to be united by religion, and their two main representative bodies, *Dukhovne upravlinnya musul'man Ukrayiny* (Clerical Board of Ukraine's Muslims, DUMU)[15] and the Mejlis,[16] harbour deep-rooted disagreements with each other. Communities avoid talking about each other, even if they live in close proximity, for example as in Genichesk. They also prefer not to talk about interconfessional disputes.

Locals see the two communities as "competing [against] or ignoring each other"[17] and gave numerous examples of mutually undermining activities, such as Meskhetian Turks in one village writing to *Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny* (Ukraine's Security Services, SBU) to accuse Crimean Tatars of extremism.

Crimean Tatars

Despite widespread misperceptions, Kherson oblast has not absorbed many Crimean Tatars since 2014 – most of them only passed through the region and are believed to have settled in Lviv. Experts interviewed for the research (and according to some media reports)[18] believe that some of those who stayed in Kherson are Muslim dissidents of Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir movements.[19] Hostile attitudes quickly took root as Russian-sponsored propaganda fuelled Islamophobia, expressed as anti-Tatar sentiment, among the Ukrainian population, while extreme nationalism is also on the rise in wider Ukraine.[20]

The largest compact settlement of Crimean Tatars in the region is in Genichesk. The community's high level of self-organisation is deemed efficient, resourceful and self-reliant. There is some inclusion in the local political system; for example, a Crimean Tatar was the head of Genichesk for five years. Nevertheless, the relations with the host communities are riddled with myths and prejudices around Tatars' involvement in radical Islam.[21]

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14   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson, November 2018

15   Although this group is for all Muslims of Ukraine, only a small number of Crimean Tatars are affiliated with it. The main parish is the Chechen community of Ukraine, which is pro-Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

16   This is the highest administrative body for Crimean Tatars in Ukraine.

17   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson, November 2018

18   For example, see I. Matushevsky, "Islamic Committee" in Henichesk: Ukraine turning into geopolitical testing area, EurAsia Daily, 18 January 2016, https://eadaily.com/en/news/2016/01/18/islamic-committee-in-henichesk-ukraine-turning-into-geopolitical-testing-area.

19   Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned in Russia, as well as in some other countries, including Germany.

20   V. Likhachev, Far-right extremism as a threat to Ukrainian democracy, Nations in Transit brief, Washington DC: Freedom House, May 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy

21   T. Kozak, The permitted and the forbidden: Ukraine's security services turn their eyes to "banned" Islamic literature, Open Democracy, 26 April 2018, https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/tetiana-kozak/ukrainian-muslims-forbidden-literature

In this research, the Crimean Tatar community complained about the local authorities and gave numerous examples of hostility. Among the most controversial were: preventing the appointment of a Crimean Tatar to the role of director of a village community centre (the House of Culture, which has been a highly respected position since Soviet times); and problems with allocating new premises in the town centre for regional Mejlis. There is a perceived sense of envy of Crimean Tatars' 'special status' (their high international profile and attention), as well as of funds raised by Crimean Tatar organisations from international donors for community projects, and governmental internally displaced person integration programmes. One example is the renovation of a second school for Crimean Tatar children in Novoolekseevka.

"People still view this assistance with mistrust and suspicion, thinking that Tatars want to buy us with that. Now it's about the school repairs financed by TIKA [Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency]. Some people look at this with suspicion: for what reason Turks are doing that for us [Tatars]? We are reproached for not investing our own money, but [using] money allocated by Ukraine … When construction had started, at the plenary meeting one person asked me with resentment and malice, why was it that the school was constructed for us? We already have a school!"[22]

These attitudes were echoed by respondents on the other side of the argument, who expressed frustration at the "closed" and "alien"[23] nature of Crimean Tatar communities.

"We have problems with Crimean Tatars – they are a separate nation, they will never become Ukrainians, Russians or Soviet people. No, they are Crimean Tatars. That's why [we do not] want a Crimean Tatar [to] take power."[24]

Respondents emphasised the large role Russian media play in stoking tensions[25] and promoting Islamophobia by, for example, presenting the idea of the Crimean Tatar Autonomy[26] as a threat to ethnic Ukrainian identity.

"The [media] campaign lasted a few months – it had a good effect, people got nervous and angry."[27]

The lack of an effective response from the regional and central authorities on this sensitive issue only breeds further interethnic tensions and people's mistrust in the state authority, and increases the sense of vulnerability among the Crimean Tatars.

There is, however, an encouraging minority that holds more nuanced views and highlights the positive role of, for example, Crimean Tatar activists.

"There are Turks and Tatar activists from Genichesk, Rykovo, Novoalekseyevka, from Chongar. They are all European, they want a better life for themselves and their children. Recently, the emphasis has been placed on the offended [those who feel offended by the host community] Tatars, but we understand that this is a constructed picture for European leaders, for the United Nations, that everything is bad here."[28]

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22   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
23   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
24   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
25   A. Leonor, Russia attempts to stir up anti-Muslim, anti-Tatar sentiments in Kherson, Euromaidan Press, 25 March 2016, http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/03/25/russia-attempts-stirring-up-anti-muslim-anti-tatar-sentiments-in-kherson/
26   R. Bari Urcosta, Controversies over proposed Crimean Tatar Autonomy in Ukraine, Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation, 25 May 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/controversies-proposed-crimean-tatar-autonomy-ukraine/
27   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
28   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

Meskhetian Turks

The Meskhetian Turks enjoy less governmental and international attention; they did not suffer directly from the annexation of Crimea and have been settled in the region for nearly three decades. That said, this relatively long-term settlement does not mean better integration, and the post-annexation growth of another Muslim group, the Crimean Tatars, has created a more complicated dynamic.

According to the 2001 national census, the Meskhetian Turk share of Chaplynka's population was 3,700 people.[29] Due to typically high birth rates in this community, local experts estimate that, in 2019, they could now number up to 10% of the *hromada's* total population. The vast majority of Meskhetian Turk families are engaged in agriculture, and they are landowners as well as renters.The community is self-organised around two structures – DUMU[30] and the Vatan Society,[31] the leader of which lives in Chaplynka.

Local residents see the Meskhetian Turk community as conservative, isolated and poorly integrated into Ukrainian culture; this is mostly perceived as being their fault. Lack of political representation was not recognised as an issue, but their loyalty to the Ukrainian state was questioned (just as with the Crimean Tatars). For example, respondents resentfully referred to the fact that, during the initial phase of the conflict in the east, local Meskhetian Turks took a neutral, wait-and-see position, which is perceived as being disloyal to the Ukrainian state.

Conflict occurs between Meskhetian Turks and Ukrainians throughout the region, but it is sporadic. Locals highlighted a few issues that they believe to be the reasons for mistrust and animosity: avoidance of military service (although the Meskhetian Turks do provide regular in-kind support to the army and some of them participated in the ATO in the Donbas); self-isolation and conservatism; the "sabotage"[32] of the Ukrainian language in schools; and a "parasitic"[33] mentality.

> *"[They] try to use all possible social benefits, avoid official employment and paying taxes."[34]*

On the other hand, respondents from the Meskhetian Turk community complained about racist attitudes (perceived as xenophobia highlighting their 'foreign' presence) and difficulties in obtaining Ukrainian citizenship,[35] although no one was able to provide the number of people who still face this problem. Examples of the former include insulting graffiti, the 'bogeyman image' (many community incidents being immediately attributed to the Meskhetian Turks), and a recent case in which a local Armenian[36] publicly called for the deportation of all Turks, which is a particularly sensitive topic given the history of the Meskhetian Turks.[37]

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29   http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/nationality/kherson/
30   See footnote 15.
31   European minorities, Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) members, FUEN, https://www.fuen.org/european-minorities/members/map/m/single/show/member/international-society-of-meskhetian-turks/, accessed [enter date]
32   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
33   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
34   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
35   Passport issues have been a major problem, at least since 2015. See D. Taraday, Crimean Tatars in the Kherson region: A long road home, BBC Ukraine, 4 March 2015, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2015/03/150304_ru_s_novooleksiivka_genichesk_tatars (in Russian).
36   This should be considered in the context of the wider and more bitter conflict between Armenians and Turks following the events of 1915, often referred to as 'the Armenian Genocide' (see Q&A: Armenian genocide dispute, BBC News, 2 June 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16352745), in the Ottoman Empire, and the ongoing Nagorny Karabakh conflict (see Nagorno-Karabakh profile, BBC News, 6 April 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18270325) involving Armenia and Azerbaijan.
37   Turkey vows to 'actively support' Meskhetian Turks, Radio Liberty, 14 November 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-vows-to-actively-support-meskehtian-turks/29600752.html; Deportation of the Meskhetian Turks, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deportation_of_the_Meskhetian_Turks, accessed January 2019

There is a noticeable lack of intercommunal relationships and understanding on all sides. For example, one Meskhetian Turk commented:

"Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians are all one nation. How can they be divided?"[38]

This type of thinking is part of the Soviet legacy. Indeed, many Meskhetian Turks expressed nostalgia for the Soviet period.

4.4 How other actors contribute to local dynamics

4.4.1 The role of civil society

Like elsewhere in Ukraine, **civil society is a patchwork** of genuine grassroots volunteer groups, established non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with access to funding, and government-organised NGOs. Kalanchak and Chaplynka residents appear to be the most 'progressive' and socially active compared to most other regions in the south of Kherson oblast. Driven by the 'Maidan promise' of change, activists formed community-based groups, thereby creating a new civil society. These activist groups identify themselves as Ukrainian (84%) and Europeans (35%), however, many inhabitants of southern Kherson oblast do not identify themselves as Europeans at all.[39]

A distinct feature of local civil society is the ex-ATO veteran organisations – these are regulated by the same law as NGOs. The far-right movement ***Pravyi Sektor*** (Right Sector) has instigated conflict, such as participation in the trade blockade of Crimea. 'Civic activism' by some of these groups has evolved into racketeering, bringing 'activists' into conflict with local residents.

Some NGOs are intertwined with the local political community. NGO leaders and activists run for office under political party banners and elected deputies establish their own NGOs. NGOs have been used to protect corporate interests, sometimes even in criminal transactions, as an instrument of pressure on business or government.

Many community groups and NGOs do try to promote positive change. However, their lack of capacity, and experience in and external support for tackling the region's multiple challenges has created "a feeling of ineffectiveness and frustration".[40] During interviews, activists expressed the need for systematic support and networking with similar groups elsewhere in the region (and possibly in Ukraine more widely).

4.4.2 The role of external actors

International actors participate in and influence local life, from the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada to Swedish investors. Russia and Turkey, however, are the most significant external actors and hold levers with regard to containing or provoking conflict.

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38   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
39   http://texty.org.ua/pg/article/editorial/read/86461/Dorogy_bidnist_nudga_Khersonshhyna_cherez_
        susidstvo_z?fbclid=IwAR2kZgT2pd0KBFKYc6OuY6_jz1n6UTMIOOhroeuor2s6PgKFtkE-MLahwBc; accessed January 2019.
40   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

Russia

Russia continues its efforts to exert influence in the region through a combination of 'soft power' and, as some respondents believe, the secret services. 'Soft' tools include media – television and radio for the older population (over 60) and social media for youth (for example, rap sub-culture and online communities). Given the role that rumours play in shaping public discourse, spreading 'fake news' in public places (public transport, markets, social services, hospitals, schools) is another way of manipulating public sentiment. Media campaigns led by former regional politicians and authoritative figures have had significant impact. An example is the anti-Crimean Tatar smear campaign featuring an exiled Ukrainian ex-member of parliament[41] propagating that "Kherson is now under [the rule of] Islamic State"[42].

> *"Russia invests in regional-specific media content, while Kyiv does not."*[43]

Media outlets operating from Crimea seem well informed about local events, as any small incident is picked up and misinterpreted.

> *"In Chaplynka a drunk soldier fights with some guys – immediately it is reported that people from Kherson are facing genocide at the hands of the Ukrainian army."*[44]

Respondents believe that Russian forces use any community conflict and try to escalate it to extremes.

> *"They would back both dog protectors* [animal rights groups] *and dog hunters – all they want is radicalisation on both sides."*[45]

Kherson politicians who fled to Russia in 2014 still have economic influence[46] (semi-legal business,[47] taxi business for crossing the Administrative Line to Crimea and back), as do local corrupt politicians who use intimidation and co-optation.

Turkey

Unlike Russia, which cannot pursue its interests in the region openly, Turkey, in the words of a respondent, is trying to "play [a role like] Hungary [does for ethnic Hungarians in Zakarpattia] for Muslims in Kherson and [wider] Ukraine". There are Turkish centres, language courses and representative offices of *Diyanet* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs).[48] Development projects, supported and funded by TIKA, are focused in Kherson oblast as well as in Kyiv. The shift to Kherson happened after Crimea's annexation, when Turkey had to relocate its projects from there.[49]

Some civil society representatives commented that Turkey was struggling to navigate the context and that its projects often failed. However, there are continuous attempts to unite the two Muslim communities in Kherson oblast. The idea of building a big new mosque is the most controversial issue for locals who do not want to see such a prominent symbol of Islam in their community.

41   Zhuravko: Islyamov could engage in nuclear terrorism for the sake of blackmailing Russia, Fort Russ News, 27 June 2016, http://fredjohs.blogspot.com/2016/06/zhuravko-islyamov-could-engage-in.html

42   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

43   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

44   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

45   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

46   In particular, Alexei Zhuravko, a former member of the Rada, and Seytumer Nimetullayev, the former chairman of the state administration of Genichesk and presently the chairman of the Public Council of the Crimean Tatar People; the Council is an alternative to the Ukrainian Mejlis banned in Russia.

47   Respondents mentioned the poppy fields on the Syvash Lake islands in Genichesk that allegedly belong to Nimetullayev.

48   Home page, Diyanet, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Presidency of Religious Affairs, https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/en-US, accessed January 2019

49   This is also part of Turkey's wider global strategy to exert influence.

5. Conflict Triggers

The triggers listed below should be considered as conflict triggers in and of themselves, but also as issues that can be exploited by external actors seeking to destabilise Kherson oblast (or Ukraine more broadly).

1. Groups associated (or perceived to be associated) with political forces that gained power post-Maidan have increased their resources and 'protest potential'. Short-term **conflict can erupt between old and new** elites in the reorganisation of power after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections; in the longer term, conflict could occur as a result of decentralisation and **land reform**.

2. Identity and related symbols are fuelling tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, such as an attempt by Meskhetian Turks to erect a historical monument or the flying of Crimean Tatar flags. The flag-flying is particularly irritating to locals following the "economic blockade of Crimea"[50] initiated by Crimean Tatars and enforced by paramilitary groups (including *Pravyi Sektor*)[51] which, according to respondents, "committed a number of wrongful acts under the national Crimean Tatar flag"[52]. Another example is land allocation for new mosques in Genichesk, Schastlivtsevo and elsewhere in the region. In each place the idea has been met by strong resistance from local authorities, as well as community members. In these circumstances, any support to Crimean Tatar/Muslim identity provided by international and/or national actors must be conflict-sensitive to not further aggravate these tense dynamics.

3. Propaganda on **Crimean Tatar Autonomy** was disseminated widely in Kherson oblast in late 2014, stating that hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars would settle there. It created a panic among the local population and spread a wave of Islamophobia and anti-Crimean Tatar sentiment that was also supported by Meskhetian Turks. Most recently (November 2018), President Poroshenko mentioned the need for constitutional amendments to accommodate the Crimean Tatar community.[53] This issue must be approached with the utmost sensitivity given the extremely complex dynamics surrounding it.

4. The desire of Turkey to **unite the Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks along religious lines** has been discussed in the region with disapproval from local non-Muslims. Plans to build a big mosque with the financial support of the Diyanet are allegedly part of this strategy. Pursuing this strategy – without due consideration of existing divisions, sensitivities and internal politics – could trigger escalation both between the two Muslim communities and with the largely xenophobic and Islamophobic non-Muslim majority. Prior to this strategy being implemented, large-scale minority integration and social cohesion programmes have to be implemented.

5. While military escalation might seem too obvious a trigger to mention, it would most certainly exacerbate all existing tensions. Communities themselves recognise this risk but do not feel sufficiently supported by Kyiv.

    "We are also a 'border' region, but all the attention is going to Donetsk and Luhansk [oblasts].*"*[54]

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50   R. Oliphant, Ethnic Tatars declare 'economic blockade' of Crimea, The Telegraph, 20 September 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11878666/Ethnic-Tatars-declare-economic-blockade-of-Crimea.html

51   Profile: Ukraine's ultra-nationalist Right Sector, BBC News, 28 April 2014, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-27173857

52   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

53   Constitutional amendments on Crimea status to be considered shortly, Poroshenko tells Crimean Tatars – media, UNIAN, 13 November 2018, https://www.unian.info/politics/10335150-constitutional-amendments-on-crimea-status-to-be-considered-shortly-poroshenko-tells-crimean-tatars-media.html

54   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018

6. Existing Peacebuilding Capacities

Many respondents believe that conflicts over land will only be finally resolved once all land is legally accounted for and taxes are paid. This indicates the need for significant state intervention. However, apart from the relatively new presence of border guards and state security forces, there is **limited presence and capacity of state authorities in the region**. What capacity exists is weak and needs strengthening across the board, from conflict management, to policing, legislation and reform implementation, to communications.

Programmes aimed at strengthening active citizenship are deemed to have also had an impact in increasing resilience to propaganda and rumours (although the problem still exists), and in helping citizens to make connections between their own locality and national and global contexts.

Local conflict-resolution practices do exist, but do not appear to be systematic. They are hampered by the weak representation of state authority. Examples range from village councils gathering community support through meetings and petitions, to applying pressure on the regional state administration, to the removal of checkpoints of the civil blockade of Crimea, to local communities documenting illegal vehicle searches and other illegal actions carried out by the Asker group (however, this group no longer seems to exist).

> *"We have to solve conflicts. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to* [trade] *with each other. Therefore, we're looking for compromises."*[55]

Finally, it is essential to highlight case studies **demonstrating the positive role that ethnic and religious minorities are playing**. For example, a Meskhetian Turk, also an ATO veteran, became a successful farmer and political activist, and thus offers a positive role model. Respondents stressed that, "it is a new phenomenon for someone from this community to be involved in regional public life in this way"[56], an encouraging sign of gradual de-isolation. However, the process of de-isolation and deeper integration will still require significant effort on all sides to maintain.

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55   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018
56   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Kherson region, November 2018