

## GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

### Crimea



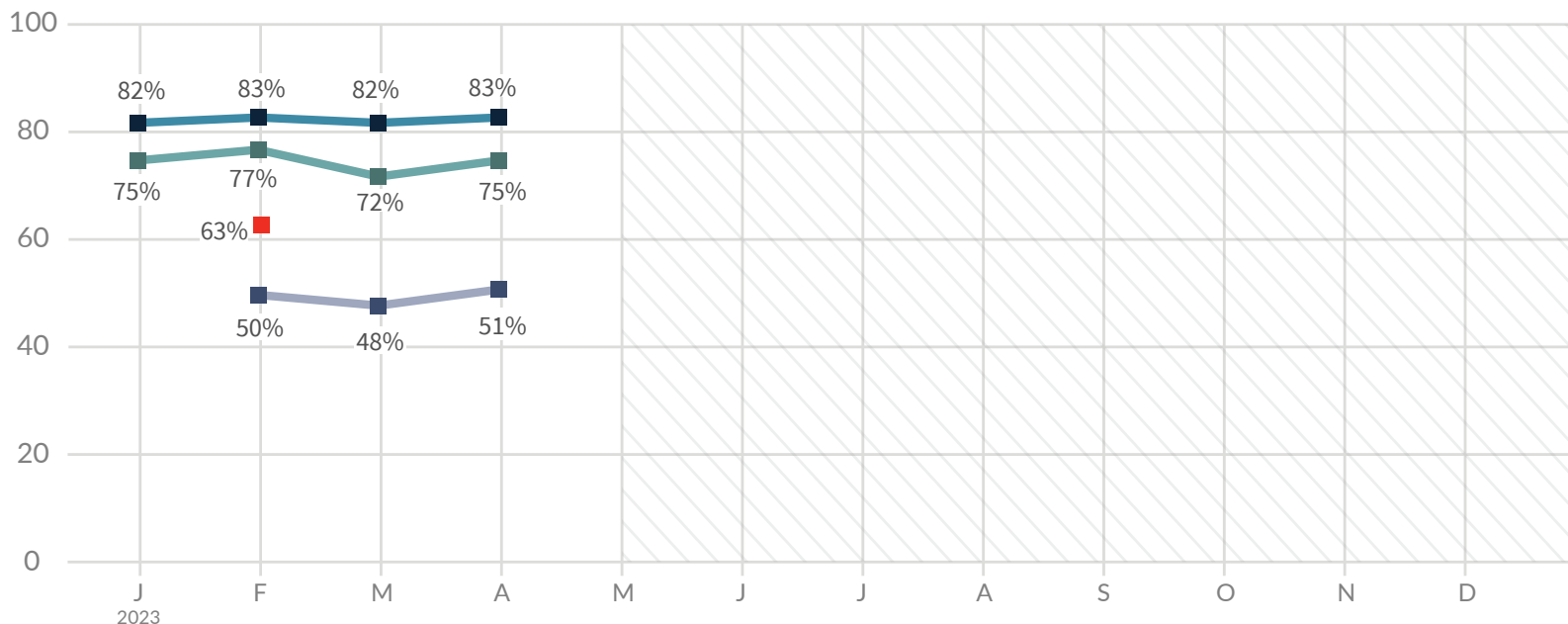
#### In the Previous Running Estimate...

- Surveys reveal that Russian domestic support for the protracted war with Ukraine is declining and concern is growing.
- Russia often uses its vast oil and gas resources as leverage to exploit global and regional crises to assert, maintain, and grow its regional influence.
- Moscow has targeted Ukrainian power-generating facilities and networks but is unlikely to break the Ukrainian will to fight.
- Europe's past failure to invest in resilient energy systems while restructuring its energy architecture to meet its climate goals created a vulnerability that Russia exploited to advance its geopolitical interests.
- European efforts to tap alternative energy suppliers and invest in measures to mitigate hardships on citizens are rapidly reducing its dependence on Russian energy and probably will replace a cornerstone of its economic architecture.
- Russia can likely cover its expenses for several years, but without a captive European energy market, it has to rely on other customers who have ready alternative suppliers and may use that position to leverage Russia.

#### This Running Estimate...

- Russian Domestic Support for Putin and the Special Military Operations remains high, although a majority of Russians support negotiations to end the conflict.
- Russia has a Crimea fixation, which explains its repeated efforts to unify the peninsula under Russian rule.
- Crimea is strategically important to Russian regional hegemony and Ukrainian sovereignty.
- Crimean Tatars may be a force multiplier for Ukraine if it attempts to retake Crimea.
- Zelenskyy's call to reclaim Crimea is meant to rally Ukrainians and divert Russia's attention, but may be a redline for Putin.

# DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS



Note: It is important to note that Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.

## APPROVE PUTIN

President Putin’s high approval rating has remained consistently in the low 80<sup>th</sup> percentile during the war. This is a significant increase over a comparable period in 2021 before the Ukrainian invasion. Regional aggression has typically boded well for Putin in driving up his approval rating, whereas domestic challenges tend to plummet his popularity.<sup>1</sup>

## SUPPORT SMO

Domestic support for the Special Military Operation (SMO) has remained stable in 2023, increasing by 3% from March to April, likely buoyed by Russian tenacity in Bakhmut. Support for the SMO continues to be the strongest among 55+ men and those who trust state news media. As in the first year of the war, it is weakest among young people, women, and those distrustful of the media.<sup>2</sup>

## SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In February, most of the population believed the SMO was succeeding, a 10% increase from September 2022 at the peak of Ukrainian counteroffensives. This significant shift in public perception suggests Russians have recovered from the shock of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensives but also points to Kremlin messaging fidelity.<sup>3</sup>

## SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

The share of Russians who prefer a negotiated resolution of the conflict increased to 51% in April from 48% in March. Despite enthusiastic support for the SMO, this increase suggests war fatigue has set in, likely due to the escalating costs of the war for the country (which has become an international pariah state), citizens (burdened by rising commodity prices, job losses, and population attrition due to fighting or forced emigration), and military (which has suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties and the expansive loss of equipment).<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORY OF CRIMEA

The Tatars, Turkic people from the steppes of Eurasia, migrated to Crimea in the 13th century. Tatars formed the Crimean Khanate in 1441 but were made a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire from 1478 until Catherine the Great conquered and annexed the peninsula as part of the Russian Empire in 1783.<sup>5</sup> That same year, Prince Potemkin established the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. Russian control of the peninsula solidified during the Russo-Turkish War (1787-1792) when Russia repelled several Turk invasions, coupled with the Black Sea Fleet's 1790 defeat of the Turks at the Battle of Kerch Strait, which prevented another Turkish landing.<sup>6</sup> During the Crimean War (1853-1856) the Turks, French, and British besieged Sevastopol for 349 days, but Russia ultimately retained the peninsula.<sup>7</sup>

***To have Crimea and give it up is like riding a horse, then dismounting and walking behind the tail.***

**—Catherine the Great**

During the Russian Revolution (1917-1923), Crimea had various designations under the burgeoning Bolshevik government and then became the seat of the “White” Russian anti-Bolshevik government until it was defeated by “Red” forces in 1921.<sup>8</sup>

The Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic existed from 1921 until it was conquered and annexed in September 1941 by Nazi Germany. During the German conquest of Crimea, the Wehrmacht besieged Sevastopol for 247 days, prompting Joseph Stalin to award the city the Order of Lenin and the title of Hero City. The Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was re-established in August 1944 after the Nazis were forced out. In June 1945 it became the Crimean Oblast of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.<sup>9</sup>

In 1954, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made Crimea part of Ukraine. The official Soviet explanation for transferring Crimea to Ukraine noted Crimea's proximity to Ukraine and their close economic and cultural ties. However, the key driver may have been to consolidate Soviet control over Ukraine. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Crimea remained part of the newly independent Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

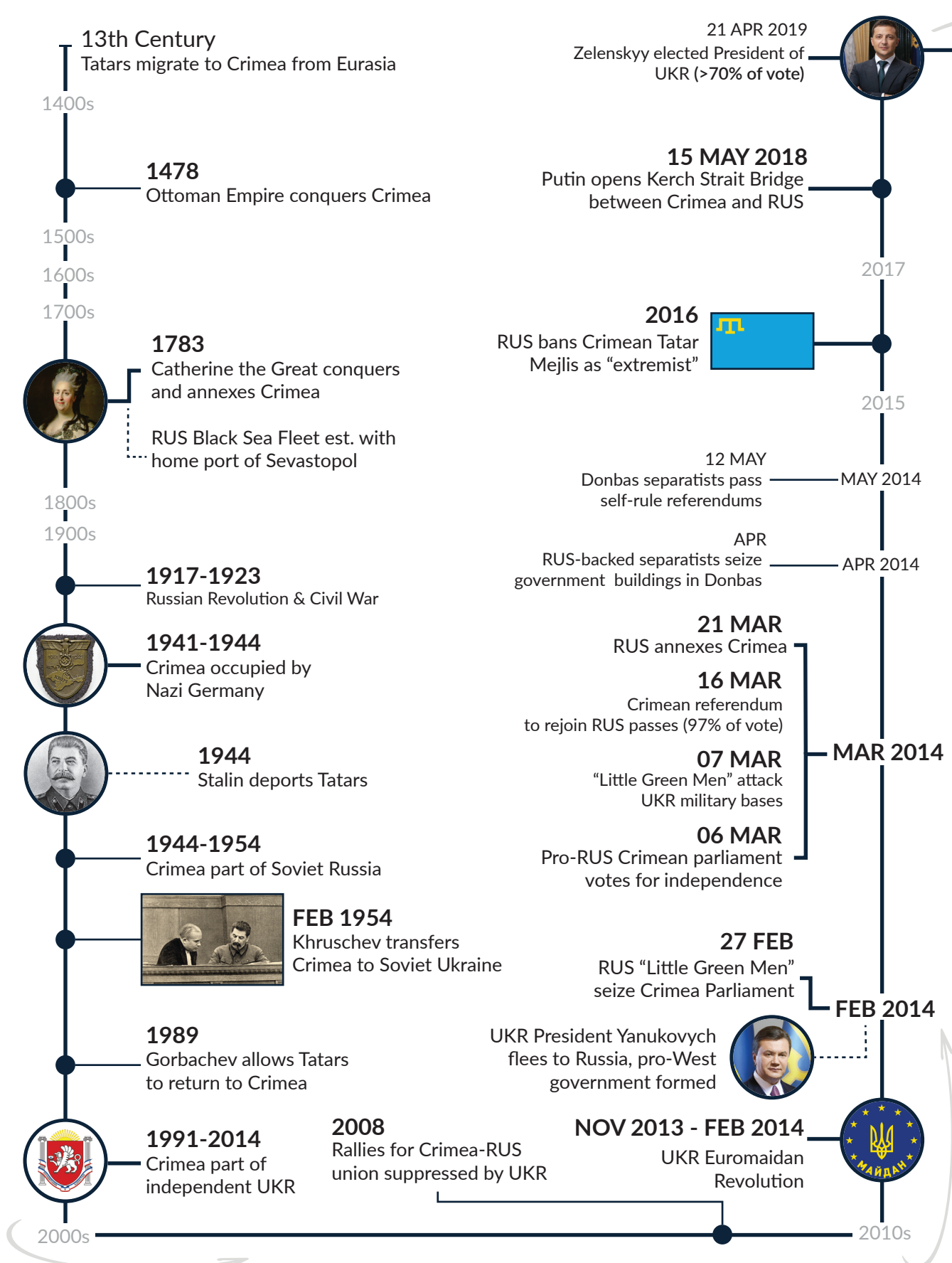
## RUSSIA SEIZES AND ANNEXES CRIMEA (AGAIN)

***Russia has a Crimea fixation, which informs its repeated efforts, struggles and warfare to unify the peninsula under Russian rule.***

- During the Ukrainian Presidency of Viktor Yanukovich (2010-2014), the Kremlin increased measures to dominate and frustrate the Ukrainian people's gravitation to the West. However, the Euromaidan protests “Revolution of Dignity” from November 2013 through February 2014 against Yanukovich's attempt to strengthen ties with the Kremlin, at the cost of potential Western integration, forced him to flee to Russia in February 2014. Russia refused to recognize the pro-West government that replaced Yanukovich, describing it as a threat to Russians living in Ukraine. For the Kremlin, this justified an intervention.<sup>11</sup>
- Russia launched a robust media campaign to gain support for intervention and to undermine the new Ukrainian government, which bolstered pro-Russian sentiment in Crimea.<sup>12</sup> According to a 2014 Gallup poll, 76% of Crimeans favored Russia over Ukraine. This likely motivated the Russian consulate to begin issuing Russian passports to Crimeans in February 2014.<sup>13</sup>
- On 27 February 2014, Cossacks and “Little Green Men” – Russian Special Operations Forces in plain green uniforms without insignia – seized the Crimean Parliament building in Simferopol, as well as airfields and telecommunications facilities. They installed a pro-Russian Prime Minister and parliament, replacing pro-Ukrainian elected lawmakers. Along with former Prime Minister Yanukovich, this new Crimea regime called for Russian intervention and a public refer-

*continued on 6*

# CRIMEA TIMELINE



2020

**26 FEB**  
Zelenskyy est. Day of Resistance to Occupation of Crimea



**MAR**  
Putin bans Ukrainians from owning coastal land in RUS Fed (~80% of Crimea)



**26 JAN**  
Kerch Strait Bridge reopens

**09 MAY**  
RUS Victory Day parade canceled in Sevastopol due to security concerns

2021

2022



**FEB**  
>140K RUS troops mass in Crimea and along East UKR border

**21 FEB**  
RUS declares independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, sends in "peacekeeping" troops



**24 FEB**  
Putin declares "special military operation" in UKR; invades through Donbas, Crimea, and Belarus

**MAR**  
RUS passes laws against "Fake News" and discrediting the RUS Armed Forces



**14 APR**  
UKR sinks RUS Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva*

**16 APR**  
RUS retaliates with massive missile bombardment

**AUG-SEP**  
UKR counteroffensive forces  
RUS retreat in NE UKR



**09 AUG**  
UKR attacks RUS Novofedorovka airbase (Saki) in Crimea

**31 OCT**  
RUS retaliates with massive missile bombardment and pulls out of UKR grain agreement



**29 OCT**  
UKR conducts drone attacks on Black Sea Fleet, damaging flagship *Admiral Makarov*

**16 OCT**  
RUS retaliates with massive missile bombardment

**08 OCT**  
UKR partially destroys Kerch Strait Bridge



**05 OCT**  
RUS annexes Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia

**21 SEP**  
RUS announces "partial" mobilization, targets Crimean Tatars

2023

Figure 2: Crimea Timeline, GCKN.

endum on independence by the end of March. On 7 March Cossacks and “Little Green Men” attacked Ukrainian military facilities. Already infiltrated by Russian agents, the poorly trained, corrupt, demotivated, and overmatched Ukrainian security forces in

Crimea soon surrendered with minimal casualties.<sup>14</sup> A public referendum for reunification with Russia passed with 97% of the vote on 16 March, and the Duma formalized Russia’s annexation of Crimea on 21 March 2014.<sup>15</sup>

## STRATEGIC VALUE OF CRIMEA

***Crimea holds immense strategic value for Russia and Ukraine. It offers Russia a warm water port, which enables it to project power in the Black Sea and beyond. Russia’s current occupation of Crimea significantly undermines Ukrainian sovereignty, security, and stability. Ukraine considers Crimea to be sovereign Ukrainian territory illegally taken by Russia, whose control of the Sevastopol naval base presents a dire threat.***

- The Crimean Peninsula is located between Europe and Central Asia, opening enormous vistas of trade opportunities for whomever controls it. The warm-water port at Sevastopol historically enabled the Russians to project maritime power in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Russia forced a long-term

“lease” agreement with Ukraine for the port immediately after Ukrainian independence in exchange for writing off part of Ukraine’s \$1B Ukrainian oil and gas debt.<sup>16</sup>

- Sevastopol is a critical element in Russia’s SMO, as it gives the Russian Black Sea fleet a strategic base to launch attacks on Ukraine and to blockade Ukrainian grain shipments. From Crimea, Russia was able to establish a naval base and project influence in Syria, although Turkey has sometimes acted to curtail this influence by closing the Bosphorus Strait to military traffic.<sup>17</sup>



Crimea map, GCKN.



## RUSSIA'S ACCESS TO SEA PORTS



Russia's Access to Sea Ports, GCKN.

- Russia's annexation of Crimea dealt a blow to Ukrainian sovereignty and pride and has become a national and international symbol of Russian aggression, which the international community has deemed illegal. Although ethnic Russians have been the majority population in Crimea for hundreds of years,

Crimea was Ukrainian territory for 60 years before Russia seized it in 2014, giving fodder to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's rallying charge to reclaim it.<sup>18</sup>

# UKRAINIAN DOMESTIC PERSPECTIVES ON CRIMEA

In numerous polls taken before and after the February 2022 Invasion, Ukrainians overwhelmingly believe that Crimea belongs to Ukraine. Since the invasion, polls indicate the majority of Ukrainians believe victory includes the liberation of all occupied territories. This sentiment is strong across the country, strongest in the West and Central areas, and slightly less in the South and the East, corresponding with the distribution of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.<sup>19</sup>

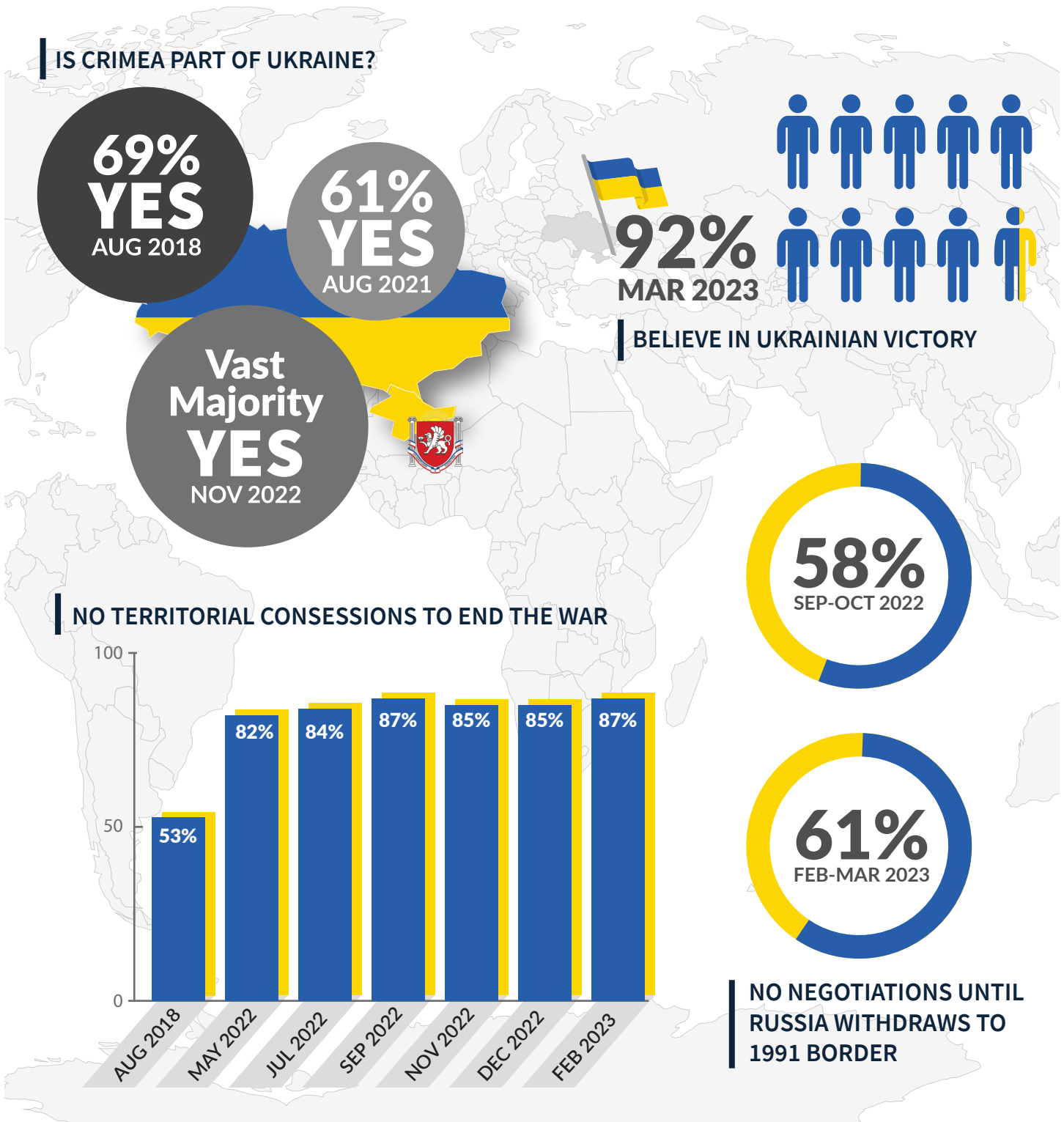


Figure 3: The Ukrainian Perspective, GCKN.



# TATARS, A FORCE MULTIPLIER FOR UKRAINE

**Due to their long history of oppression by Russia and their generally positive relationship with Ukraine, Crimean Tatars are an asset in the event Ukraine attempts to retake Crimea.** Russians have treated Tatars as second-class citizens since 1783 and exiled the entire population of Crimean Tatars for over 50 years. Recent Russian discrimination of Tatars includes frequent raids, arrests, and mobilization to fight against Ukraine. This is contrasted by generally positive sentiments of Ukrainians for Tatars over time.

- After the Russian occupation and annexation in 2014, Russian authorities began a campaign targeting Tatars as disloyal to Russia. Russian persecution of Tatars has increased since the 2022 invasion with frequent raids and arrests of those under suspicion of pro-Ukrainian activities.<sup>20</sup> According to the Crimean Tatar Resource Center, 70% of all political prisoners in Crimea are Tatars and nearly 200 Tatars have been prosecuted since 2014. Many Tatars are accused of ties to Hizb ut-Tahrir, a legal pan-Islamist political party in Ukraine termed radical and proscribed by Russia in 2003. Other Tatars have been charged with subversive activities and violating the Kremlin’s anti-defamation laws.<sup>21</sup>

- Along with other minority groups across the Russian Federation, Tatars have been a target for forced mobilization following the Russian decree in September 2022. Crimean activists estimate that more than 1,500 Tatars were mobilized within the first three days,<sup>22</sup> suggesting their overrepresentation among those mobilized compared to the ethnic Russian majority.

**For [Crimean Tatars], the Russian army [of today] is the same army that in 1944 put their grandparents on trains [during Sürgün]. “For many, this is a question of historical memory.”**

**—Crimean Tatar activist and journalist Lutfiye Zudiyeva<sup>25</sup>**

- The Tatars are an important population for Russian resistance and Ukrainian support. They have spoken out against the Russian occupation and are largely pro-Ukraine, as there is no history of persecution by Ukrainians.<sup>23</sup> A July-August 2021 survey showed that 57% of Ukrainians support Crimean Tatar national autonomy after the liberation of Crimea, a 7% increase from 2018, and 61% support Crimean Tatars as an indigenous people of Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

## Crimean population

A look at the historical composition of Crimea’s population.

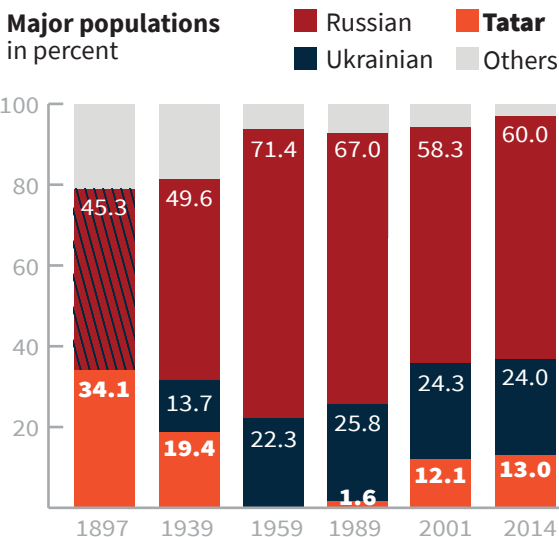


Figure 4: Crimean Population, GCKN.

After the Ottoman conquest of Crimea, the Tatars lived alongside the Turks for nearly 400 years until the Russian Empire conquered Crimea. Russian oppression of the Tatars began after annexation in 1783 through Russification of the region, seizure of land, and crushing the Tatar nationalist movement. It continued through the Russian Revolution and into World War II, leading hundreds of thousands of Tatars to flee the area. By 1939, the Tatar population, which once dominated the region, made up less than 20% (~200,000) of the population of Crimea.<sup>26</sup>

After the USSR regained Crimea from the Nazis in 1944, Premier Joseph Stalin branded the Tatars as Nazi collaborators and ordered their mass deportation to Central Asia. Nearly 100,000 Tatars died in what is referred to as *Sürgün*,<sup>1</sup> which Ukraine has declared genocide. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev allowed the Tatars to return in 1989. Since their return, Tatars have lived in Crimea as second-class citizens, under suspicion by Russia and ethnic Russians, prompting Tatar distrust.<sup>27</sup>

1 *Sürgün* means “expulsion” or “exile” in Turkish.

# ROLE OF CRIMEA IN THE UPCOMING UKRAINIAN OFFENSIVE

***Ukrainian determination to reclaim all seized territory is very strong. However, its focus on the liberation of Crimea is likely an attempt to divert Russian attention and resources away from the anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive.***

- Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian government officials have repeatedly stated that Ukraine will retake all Russian occupied land, particularly Crimea.<sup>28</sup> However, liberating Crimea may be a redline for Putin to deploy nuclear weapons, according to experts familiar with his thinking.<sup>29</sup> Even if Russia does not use nuclear weapons, Ukraine will still struggle to dislodge Russia, which has had time to build defenses and solidify its hold on Crimea with a significant pro-Russian population. This is despite recent reports that relations are strained between the majority pro-Russian population and Russian occupation authorities and troops.<sup>30</sup>
- If Ukraine is to dislodge Russia from Crimea, its efforts will likely hinge in part on the small but active pro-Ukraine resistance movement in Crimea and support from minority Tatars not already part of the resistance. Other factors may include the Ukrainian Armed Forces' ability to disrupt the land bridge between Crimea and Russia through a counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast, as well as the disabling of the Kerch Straight Bridge to isolate Russians in Crimea.<sup>31</sup>
- Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian leaders are increasingly tempering expectations regarding the possible liberation of Crimea and Donbas, a stark contrast from their nearly exuberant characterization of a planned counteroffensive. According to Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, "The expectation from our counteroffensive campaign is overestimated in the world," a perspective shared by Zelenskyy, who now says he would consider reclaiming any occupied territory a success.<sup>34</sup>

Several resistance movements of various strengths and focus operate against Russia in Crimea. *Atesh*<sup>2</sup> and *Yellow Ribbon* are two of the most reported resistance groups in Crimea, while other groups have claimed responsibility for actions against Russian occupiers since the invasion. *Atesh* was formed in September 2022 and consists of Ukrainians, Tatars, and Russians. It is responsible for several assassinations and attacks against Russian authorities and collaborators, as well as acts of sabotage. Notably, *Atesh* created an online course meant to teach disgruntled Russian soldiers how to sabotage their equipment, claiming at one time to have 4,000 Russian soldiers enrolled.<sup>32</sup> The *Yellow Ribbon* movement is active in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, including Crimea. *Yellow Ribbon* was formed in April 2022. It focuses on crowdsourcing information on Russian troop movements and locations and putting up visual symbols of resistance, such as anti-occupation graffiti and hanging yellow ribbons and Ukrainian flags in public spaces.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Atesh* means "fire": Crimean Tatar: *Ateş*; Ukrainian: *Amew*.

# RESEARCH TEAM

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