3 The Crimea Returns to Ukraine

'It's like a game of roulette. We don't know who they are or what they stand for.'

(Crimean voter)

'... we again appear to be better interests of the Ukrainian state than the Ukrainians themselves.'

(Crimean Tartars)

The Crimea has on at least two occasions nearly become another 'hot spot' among the many that have engulfed the former USSR since its disintegration in December 1991. The two peaks of crisis in relations between Ukraine and the Crimea occurred in May 1992, when the peninsula declared its independence, and during the first half of 1994, when the Russia bloc came to power in the Crimea.

The Ukrainian leadership can be credited, though, with possessing the political skills to refrain from adopting a violent solution to the Crimean problem, in stark contrast to that employed by Boris Yeltsin in Chechnya in December 1994. Violent policies to suppress separatism have not been successful in the former USSR, and the most glaring example of the failure of this use of force has been witnessed in Chechnya.

The use of a variety of non-violent methods by the Ukrainian leadership to restore the Crimea to its sovereignty were successful. Within the space of only one year – between spring 1994 and spring 1995 – support for pro-Russian separatism in the Crimea collapsed, and the leadership of the autonomous region was replaced by pro-Ukrainian local leaders. The credit for this change in political climate in the Crimea should also be given to the incompetence of the nationalistic Russia bloc, which came to power in early 1994 with a 'ragbag of promises' that they could not but fail to implement.

Earlier events in the Crimea and its relations with Kyiv are not covered in this chapter. Rather this chapter surveys the three crucial years from 1994 to 1996 when the Crimea evolved from open confrontation with Kyiv to the stabilisation of its relations with Ukraine, as reflected by the
adoption of the Ukrainian law enacting the new draft Crimean constitution in May 1996.

ELECTIONS IN THE CRIMEA

Presidential Elections

During the first round of the January 1994 Crimean presidential elections six candidates competed for the post, of which only one, Nikolai Bagrov, was ‘pro-Ukrainian’. Of the other candidates only one – Vladimir Verkoshansky, a local businessman – focused on economic affairs. Other businessmen backed Bagrov, who portrayed himself (in a manner similar to Leonid Kravchuk) as the candidate of ‘stability’.

We support Bagrov only because we see him as a peaceful way to economic self-determination. If Crimea declared itself independent it will definitely end in war. Kravchuk, as President, would be obliged to guarantee the territorial integrity of Ukraine, local businessmen feared.

Yet Bagrov, like his fellow Party of Power colleagues in Ukraine (either individually or through similar groups such as the Labour Party of Ukraine, the Party of Power in the Donbas), did not back privatisation or radical economic reform. In Bagrov’s view, foreign investment could not be allowed in the Crimea because ‘Morgans, Rockefellers and other big capitalists from the West will buy up the whole of the Crimea’. Bagrov was also cautious about private property, especially on land, because ‘We are unsure yet just how much Crimean land is worth’.

One of Bagrov’s main backers was the Party of Economic Revival of the Crimea (PEVK), the party of the ‘fat cats’, which linked together the clannish interests of the post-communist Crimean nomenklatura (or the Party of Power). It therefore was firmly opposed to both the Russia bloc and the communists. Ironically, the backing that Bagrov received as presidential candidate from the December 1993 PEVK congress (after a proposal to back Ivan Yermakov was supported by only a minority of delegates) transformed him into a ‘great Ukrainian patriot’ – the very same individual who, as Crimean parliamentary speaker, had orchestrated the May 1992 declaration of independence. Other groups which backed Bagrov were allied to the PEVK, such as the Party of Social Guarantees of the Crimea, the National Concord Party of the Crimea and the Agrarian Party of the Crimea.

Viktor Mezhak, leader of the People’s Party of the Crimea, was refused registration as a presidential candidate as his party had registered on