

By Isabelle Mandraud

Crimea's rapid Russification means pride for some but perplexity for others

Eight months after annexation, the former Ukrainian peninsula is undergoing a massive social and bureaucratic overhaul

*Швидка русифікація Криму для одних означає гордість, але викликає непорозуміння в інших
Через вісім місяців після анексії колишній український півострів переживає повномасштабну соціальну та
бюрократичну перебудову*

Наразі в Криму триває повномасштабна русифікація півострову. До Сімферополю прибули московські функціонери для запровадження російських стандартів у сфері освіти, охорони здоров'я, безпеки, оподаткування, в банківській сфері. На офіційних будівлях висять російські стяги, українська гривня вийшла з обігу вже через місяць після анексії і була замінена на російський рубль, люди обмінюють свої паспорти, реєстраційні номери на автомобілях. Ці всі зміни викликають занепокоєність у місцевого населення, незалежно від того, чи підтримують вони анексію Криму, чи є прихильниками півострову як українського. Наразі життя багатьох людей перетворилося на постійне очікування у чергах для отримання якогось документу, крім того людям доволі важко знайти роботу в силу багатьох причин. А найбільш неспокійно в

Криму себе відчують кримські татари, які ще не забули масової депортації у 1944 році.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/11/crimea-russia-ukraine-change-annexation>



The hotels in Simferopol are packed. It is late autumn and the administrative capital of Crimea has been overrun, not by holidaymakers – the season and political climate are hardly suitable – but by Russian officials. “Even in summer we’re not this busy,” says the manager of a small guesthouse. The

functionaries are here to bring all the key administrative sectors – health, education, security, taxation, banking – in line with Moscow standards. A census has started. Eight months after the [peninsula was annexed](#), Russification is in full swing.

The Russian flag flutters over official buildings. The telephone operators have all changed. The uniforms are the same as anywhere else in Russia. It took barely a month for the hryvnia, the Ukrainian currency, to drop out of circulation, replaced by the rouble. It took slightly longer for Russian passports to start being issued and the registration numbers on vehicles to change. In Sevastopol the souvenir dealers on the seafront are hawking, alongside jerseys like the ones worn by sailors of the Black Sea fleet, another style of T-shirt. “Bugger your sanctions,” one of them says, pointing to an explicit design featuring stylised Russian and American males.

There are more, some glorifying Vladimir Putin, others celebrating “polite people”, armed to the teeth and wearing camouflage. The expression, now in vogue as far away as Moscow, started here. It refers to the [Russian troops who seized the peninsula](#) by force in March – without bloodshed, but also without insignia. Since then the number of these people, also referred to as “little green men” like Martians, has tripled.

So much for the visible signs of change. A new, more far-reaching stage is now under way, its aim being to convert all the organs of state and oblige business to comply with a new accounting system.

Regardless of whether they are pro-Russia or not, many Crimeans are deeply confused, dashing back and forth between solicitors and government offices. “Daily life now means long queues, for everything: birth and residence certificates, driving licences and so on,” says Maria, 25, who has lost her job in a firm importing and exporting essential oils. Her mother, Lena, is a Russian teacher and has finally found a few pupils, thanks to Skype. “I used to work at the university, but it’s no longer possible, not with just a residence permit,” she says.

The family, who would rather not be named, refuses to take Russian nationality. Only the grandfather has given in “to save his house, at least”. These formalities are simply tedious for some people, but for others, mainly Ukrainians and Tatars – the Muslim minority still traumatised by [mass deportation in 1944](#) – they are a source of anxiety.

“People are trying to understand what’s going on,” Mark Butovski, 24, says gently. He runs a business specialising in internet advertising. “The money is the most complicated part; each time I buy something, I wonder if it’s more expensive,” he adds. “In my case it was fairly straightforward, but a lot of small businesses imported everything from Ukraine, anything from tomatoes to overcoats.”

The big Russian corporations have moved in, but to dodge sanctions they have changed their names and trademarks. They thus appear to have no connection with the parent company. The ties with Ukraine are gradually being severed. Radio and television broadcasts from Kiev are off the air. In schools, not many courses were taught in Ukrainian as it was, but their number has been halved, despite the claims by the new authorities that there are now “three official languages”, Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar.

“I was born here, I work here, but I don’t feel either Ukrainian or Russian,” Butovski says with a sigh.

“I’d like to feel European but the reality around me forces me to have another way of life. I don’t have much option.” A majority of the population are Russian speakers and voted “Yes” in the March referendum, supporting Russia and President Putin. The others feel like they are living in “occupied territory”.

“It’s all Gorbachev’s fault,” says Georgui Nossan, standing in a field minding his cows, halfway between Simferopol and Sevastopol. The old Russian peasant farmer blames the last Soviet head of state for [allowing the union to collapse](#). “Look at what’s going on in Ukraine now. It’s shameful!” he adds. Wages and pensions have been increased, but Nossan has not noticed, confused by changing currency and rising prices. But he is pleased Crimea is once more part of Russia. Whenever Russian planes fly overhead, he waves his hat and shouts: “Say hello to Putin.”

“We’ve been talking about and waiting for this moment for 20 years,” says Crimea’s new leader, [Sergei Aksyonov](#), 41. A former businessman, born in Moldova, he moved here in 1989. In 2010 he became a deputy of the supreme council of Crimea and is now prime minister. He maintains that “tranquillity” has been restored.

He nevertheless refuses to let us into his office and stays close to his grim bodyguard even in the ante-room. “Billions of roubles will be allocated to the federal budget, including [\$535m] this year for just Simferopol. All is quiet and everyone is pleased,” he says.

What about the militia? “Patriots,” he corrects sharply, “who will become a legal, unarmed municipal police force on 1 January.”

In the meantime, the place will have been cleaned up. “Two weeks ago the heads of the oil and gas companies were fired, the heads of hospitals too. The day before yesterday it was the turn of the water companies, in fact 90% of the heads of central organisations,” he explains. All on the grounds of combating corruption, but without bothering with a trial. “They wrote their letters of resignation themselves.”

Andrey Kiskov, 31, one of the few human rights campaigners we found, does not entirely agree. In the private sector, he asserts, “they are forcibly nationalising filling stations, factories and markets that belonged to Ukrainians, assisted by armed men in plain clothes, paramilitary organisations with no legal basis.” “A new law,” he adds, “requires purportedly strategic firms, such as the Yalta film studios, to be bought up. But no one can say why.”

Yalta, the Black Sea resort made famous by the conference in 1945 where Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill redrew the map of Europe, is back in the news. The film studios, built after the 1917 Russian revolution and extending over 30 hectares, have changed hands, under pressure.

The owner allegedly “failed to fulfil his obligations regarding investments”, says council leader Andrey Rostenko, appointed two months ago. Here too Russian officials are hard at work. Public services are being completely overhauled, with staff being replaced and the number of councillors cut from 280 to 28. “In six months we’ve received more subsidies than in 20 years as part of Ukraine,” Rostenko brags. “And if it’s not immediately apparent, that’s because we started with telecommunications.”

However, a fifth of Yalta’s population did not respond to census officers. Illona and Sehrii Dorochenko, respectively 30 and 42, say they are “Ukrainian, by reaction”. Like many other families they have just as many relations in Russia as in Ukraine, but the annexation of Crimea upset them. “On 27 February we woke up to find the little green men,” Illona says.

Since then she has set about writing the Chronicles of Russian Crimea on Facebook. She describes everything: the price of fish that has gone up, the “pseudo-border” with Ukraine, even the babushkas who are shipped in from Russia for a holiday to make up for the tourists.

She takes care not to go too far. A Russian federal law, which came into force in May, classifies any offence against “the integrity of Russia” as “terrorism”.