

BRIEFING

- 4 **The chaos begins**
What to expect in the new parliamentary season

POLITICS

- 7 **Michael Street: "NATO looks at improving how defense forces from different nations can work together better"**
NATO Communications and Information Agency Innovation Manager on NATO Hackathons and the features of the first Ukrainian defense hackathon



- 10 **Dubious ally**
Michael Binyon on the conflict between Turkey and West and NATO
- 12 **Shigeki Sumi: "You don't need to worry about the unity of G7 on issue of Ukraine"**
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to Ukraine on the development of business ties between our countries and the place of Tokyo in the security situation in the Pacific region

FOCUS

- 16 **The return of soviet Crimea**
What's happening with the Ukrainian peninsula's economy these days?
- 22 **Lieutenant-General Serhiy Nayeв: "The Joint Forces should put an end to Russian aggression against Ukraine"**
The Ukrainian Week discussed the first results of the Joint Forces Operation in the Donbas with its commander



- 24 **The island of bureaucrats and soldiers**
How Russia is turning Crimea into a military base by changing its economy and society

SOCIETY

- 27 **The cost of cool**
To save or to kill? The scientists give a lot of pros and cons about air conditioners



- 30 **One year, two languages, thousands of reasons**
The passage of the German-Ukrainian Year of Languages

- 32 **What's wrong with values?**
Philippe de Lara on the principles of the existence of modern society

- 34 **The problem with Irish**
Ignoring the language issue risks the likelihood that Ukrainian will disappear altogether in Ukraine

- 38 **Linguistic concessions as a guarantee of occupation**
Could Ukrainization have prevented the current occupation of the East of Ukraine?

NEIGHBORS

- 40 **Rostyslav Prokopiuk: "It is activists who generally are forced to defend the interests of the Ukrainian state in the Czech Republic"**
Psychologist from Volyn who became known in the Czech Republic for helping people with addictions on his help for the Ukrainian military and the promotion of Ukrainian culture abroad



- 42 **The anatomy of Slovak russophilia**
How Russia is building a network of influence in Slovakia

HISTORY

- 44 **The strikes of opportunism and independence**
Miners' strikes: how the Soviet coal industry helped the Soviet Union collapse

CULTURE & ARTS



- 48 **The occupied legacy**
Who should protect the cultural heritage of Crimea?

- 50 **A month of music and old cars**
The Ukrainian Week offers a selection of events to visit in September

The Ukrainian Week

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The occupied legacy

Who should protect the cultural heritage of Crimea?

Mykhailo Yakubovych



PHOTO: UKRINFOPRI

Barbarian restoration. Russian initiatives in Bakhchysarai have resulted in barbaric renovation of the Khan's Palace

In 2017, Ukrainian media buzzed about the “barbarian reconstruction” of the Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai, a complex of palaces that were home for Crimean khans constructed in the 15th century. It acquired its modern looks in the 18th century with a series of reconstructions after a bypassing unit of Russian Feldmarschall Kristof Minikh burned the khans' residence down in 1736.

To Crimean Tatars and many other peoples of the region this palace is the equivalent of the hetmans' palace in Chyhyryn for Ukrainians, Versailles in Paris for the French or Topkapi in Istanbul for the Turks – a symbol of their past power. After the Bakhchysarai complex ended up in the hands of the occupational authorities in 2014, the preservation of this historical site became a burning topic.

The Russia media report that Ukraine has neglected the site so Russia is now investing new funding to revive it. The Ukrainian media report that it is being ruined but don't offer more details. UNESCO has issued some statements on it: the Khan's Palace was nominated for the World Heritage list in 2003. Statements have also been published by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Crimean Tatar organizations, including the Mejlis, the representative body of Crimean Tatars. A “trial process” against the “government of Crimea” is ongoing in the occupied peninsula. According

to the local media, it is about negligent treatment of ornaments in the palace – some calligraphic scriptures have been plastered with concrete by the workers doing the repairs, the old roof was replaced with modern tiles, and more.

This puts the occupational authorities in a strange position: they build a major mosque in Simferopol and constantly report improvements for Crimean Tatars on the one hand, while making such a gross reputation-damaging mistake on the other hand. It looks like the ongoing rapid rewriting of historical memory to fit Russia's narrative will reveal more of similar “reconstruction” or “restoration” fails by Russia in the occupied Crimea. Reports of similar damage have come from Khersones Tavriysky, a cultural reserve where “reconstructions” were made using modern materials and a street stage was installed at a historical site. Access to these sites has been restricted so they are receiving fewer visitors.

While the Khan's Palace is in the spotlight, other sites are as important to remember. The narrative of old Crimean history goes far beyond the peninsula as it covers the traces of Turkic political presence in Southern Ukraine. Unfortunately, many Ukrainians see this period as a time of alien rivals and aggressive conquerors, and as something very remote from the history on which Ukraine is based in their eyes, that is the history of Kyiv Rus and the Cossacks.

We will not aim to dispute the demographic losses suffered from the Tatar and Nogai assaults against Ukrainian cities and settlements, although the actual scientific discussion on this topic is still ahead. But the other side of this medal was the domestication of the steppe and the incorporation of it into the Ukrainian mindset. In our minds today, Ukraine is unthinkable as the South-Western forests without South-Eastern steppes.

Another dimension of that Turkic legacy is political: as Ukraine is waiting for a tomos of autocephaly for its Church, it recalls that the steppe regions had been the “canonical territory” of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul) before they were conquered by

Russia. Until recently, only historians discussed this. Now, some sources claim, this fact can be helpful in Ukraine's pursuit of autocephaly.

The question is what of this history – more familiar to some of us, and less so to others – can be rescued so that it can speak for itself in the future. The Turkic sites of the Great Steppe include numerous tombs with Ottoman scriptures. Previously, some of them ended up in Ukrainian museums while most were simply crumbling. These tombs have not yet been catalogued properly. Other sites include the Akkerman Fortress, the mosque in Izmail, the sites in Ochakiv, Mykolayiv and Dnipro. Quite recently, Dnipro municipal authorities transferred to the Crimean Tatar community the building of an old mosque. This marked an important development for the Muslim Crimean Tatars and the right step in terms of memory policy and restoration of justice.

Not all sites get this lucky. I studied Crimean Tatar manuscripts that are now scattered anywhere from the US to Iran, and was extremely happy to find some in Lviv's History of Religion Museum. After I researched the materials stored at the museum – they come from Zincirli Madrasa, the oldest Islamic educational facility of Eastern Europe located in Crimea – I found out that most of the collection returned to Crimea in 2008. These Crimean stocks were originally moved to Lviv in the 1970s when the first Museum of Religion History and Atheism in the Ukrainian SSR opened there. After Zincirli was restored in 2008, the manuscripts were returned to it. In 2007, Turkey invested almost US \$3mn in the site and Zincirli opened as a museum complex in 2009. Ten years later, the occupants removed the Ukrainian and Turkish flags from the nameplate. Some Russian bloggers only lamented about the fact that plate scripts were in Turkish, Ukrainian and English, not in Russian. No Crimean sources report about what happened to the manuscripts, including at least several dozen handwritten Qurans of the 16-19th centuries, whether they are still stored in Bakhchysarai, and

whether all of the museum's other materials remain intact.

It is no secret that many archeological and other artifacts from Ukraine used to often end up in European or Russian markets. Until recently, a website worked that sold all kinds of finds, including from Crimea. A colleague once showed me a fragment of an interesting astronomic device with Arabic scripts on it found near Crimea – he bought it for peanuts at one of website's auctions. As a rule, artifacts end up on the black market far more often than they do in the hands of researchers or museums. Also, there have been massive cases of stealing artifacts from museums in Ukraine. Book archives on Ukraine's territory were often damaged by burglars, fires or political decisions. For example, Stalin's regime handed over a third of the stocks held at the Lviv Ossolineum Library to the Polish People's Republic in 1947.

In the 21st century, it is crucial to preserve sites and artifacts both physically and digitally. Modern Digital Humanities have developed to the point of creating global databases of manuscripts and are about to offer more opportunities, including search, analysis, copying and reading of the newly digitalized manuscripts. Until recently, all this took some very painstaking efforts. Digitalized manuscripts today offer access to materials that have been destroyed, are endangered or lost. This makes the work of researchers so much easier.

At one point, the remains of Ossolineum's handwritten funds (now held at the Vasyl Stefanyk Lviv National Research Library) were scanned and posted for free access on a Polish site. We are only dreaming about something similar: Ukrainian researchers are still facing quite a few bureaucratic barriers when accessing archives. For example, every local scientist in Turkey where some of the largest collections in the world are stored has the right to get copies of manuscripts free of charge. In Ukraine, obtaining copies of manuscripts is often a challenge. Some museums welcome cooperation from researchers while others don't provide full catalogue information. To make things worse, the recent Resolution № 2059/5 by the Ministry of Justice essentially bans free copying of most documents, including manuscripts, archive researchers lament, so the copying of documents by ordering the service from a given archive becomes pretty costly. It's easy to understand the scale of the challenge: a request to copy a hundred pages of a document from the 17th or 18th century means spending almost the whole monthly salary for a Ukrainian researcher. Meanwhile, the

Russian authorities have included hundreds of Crimean sites and artifacts in their records and are actively developing their own interpretation of Crimea's ancient and modern history. Russia has several research centers working since 2014 that have published many journals, collections, magazines, translations – including of Crimean classics – and history books. Not all of them serve the purpose of Russia's narrative as their authors had been worked on their topics long before the occupation of Crimea. Still, this is a Russian view of the Crimea, and it is developing under a pattern applied to other Muslim subjects of the Russian Federation. What makes the situation of Crimea different is that the official Russian historiography often treats Crimean Tatars as the incoming settlers, and Crimea as "Russian land". All these materials are translated into other languages and promoted in the global research community thereby shaping the "Russian humanitarian aura" for Crimea and the Russian school of Crimean studies. Also, *kazasker* or *ka-diasker* books, the long-time records of the chief judge from the Bakhchysarai court that make one of the most valuable source of Crimea's history – were partly destroyed and partly taken to St. Petersburg back in the day. They now remain at the Russian National Library.

A great contributor to the research of Crimea's history was the Foundation of Bekir Çoban-zade founded by Resul Veliliyev, a well-known Crimean businessman and philanthropist. The foundation published manuscripts and funded an annual fellowship to research Crimean Tatar history. The foundation was active throughout the period of occupation. Then Resul Veliliyev was arrested in April 2018 under bogus allegation of stocking up on expired candies to sell them later. He has already spent several months under detention at the Moscow Lefortovo prison. Commentators assume that this case can be politically motivated: many in Crimea and Moscow don't like any "independent" Crimean Tatar activity. In October, a Kurultai of Crimean Muslims is scheduled to take place as yet another attempt to legitimize figures loyal to the Kremlin as so-called leaders of the Crimean Tatar people.

Integrating a smaller culture into the greater concept by monopolizing the interpretation of it perfectly fits into the concept of colonial politics. That's how old oriental archives were compiled in the early modern Europe. The compila-

tion of oriental funds in the Escorial Royal Library began with the Spanish pirates seizing a Moroccan boat with Arabic manuscripts and gifting them to Phillip II. Such approaches could have been a norm 300 years ago but can hardly be normal today when the research of old times is based on public availability of sources. While many EU member-states allocate multimillion grants to support the research of manuscripts and art pieces preserved in the local libraries, this window of opportunity is slowly closing down in many problematic areas.

In Ukraine, deportation of Crimean Tatars stands within the same category as the Holodomor and is echoed by the current occupation of Crimea. Many efforts are focused on keeping the topic of

After Zircirli was restored in 2008, the manuscripts were returned to it. In 2007, Turkey invested almost US \$3mn in the site and Zircirli opened as a museum complex in 2009

Crimea on the surface of international politics. Culture – of Crimean Tatars and others – plays a significant role in this. It makes sense to interpret all cultural values remaining in Crimea as stolen. But this raises many nuances and problems from the perspective of international law. As a result of some of these problems, Scythian gold from a Crimean museum that was displayed in the Netherlands several years ago has not yet been returned to Ukraine. Time has come to create comprehensive databases or catalogues that would allow us to develop clearer demands regarding the preservation of this legacy. This is a task not just for the fans of old history and artifacts, museum staff or the ministries in charge. The problem is that all this Crimean history is gradually used to legalize the occupation of the peninsula. Some crucial cultural values can be taken out of Crimea (that's why it's important to discuss this with international organizations that have some tools of influence).

A pretty straightforward, yet difficult and costly task is to create a hub in Ukraine for the cultures of indigenous peoples, thus turning it into the main center for broadcasting cultural senses, and historic memory to a certain extent. This will probably take more than just instructing a respective institute at the National Academy of Sciences. What we need is an institution with a modern model, modern funding and academic productivity. Meanwhile, Crimea seems to increasingly turn into a cultural island with fewer bridges connecting it to Ukraine. ■