

Crimea as Friction Point in Russian-Ukrainian Relations

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In recent months, according to Ukrainian newspaper *Zerkalo Nedeli*, quoting a high official of the Russian Ministry of Defence, there have been tensions between Kiev and Moscow because Ukraine is allegedly impeding an agreement to guarantee the normal functioning and renewal of the Russian Black Sea fleet. This would also be confirmed by a visit in late February of Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu to Sevastopol to meet his Ukrainian colleague Pavel Lebed and attempt to solve the many problems surrounding the joint management of the Sevastopol naval base. The factors creating this state of tension are essentially geopolitical (access to the Black Sea) and ethnic: the majority of the population in Crimea is made up of Russians, who are considered by Moscow compatriots abroad to protect, though they may also be used as potential “Trojan horses” for Moscow’s territorial claims).

Among the various issues troubling relations between the two countries, we therefore find the specific problem of the legal status of the Russian naval base in Sevastopol. Shared with the Ukrainian navy according to a 1997 treaty that divided the Black Sea fleet between Russia and Ukraine, the latter country would like to have more control over the base from the military, political and administrative point of view and impose higher costs on Russia for its lease. Russia, of course, wants more favourable conditions for this point of support of crucial strategic value for the control of the Black Sea and of the Southern Caucasus (Georgia in particular and above all its enclaves, now under Russian control, of Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast and South Ossetia) and of the Caspian Sea. All elements that Russia considers an integral part of its sphere of influence and of its safety policies. These are conceptualised and implemented first of all via the deployment of its military and economic presence in the area in order to guarantee the transit of the pipelines, to crush any regional crises that may put stability at risk and, most importantly, to prevent any enlargement of NATO. For this reason, Moscow considers any attempt by Ukraine to control the movements of its fleet an unjustifiable form of political interference, even through indirect means such as border or administrative controls that slow down its port activities or the process of renewal of its fleet and of the port infrastructures.

The strategic implications of this are evident: any Ukrainian interference in the movements of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea, whether administrative, border-related or political (as in the case of the explicit authorization request required by the Ukrainian government for Russian ships to leave the naval base to reach any crisis zones situated beyond Ukrainian borders, something that was introduced during the 2008 Russian-Georgian crisis under the leadership of President Yushchenko and which is still in force), violates the sovereignty of the Russian state, significantly undermining naval military efficiency and fatally compromising its strategic and political effectiveness. The problem represented by the Sevastopol naval base – which hosts around 70% of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet and the lease of which has been recently renewed until 2042 in exchange for more favourable conditions in energy payments to Russia – and of Crimea as a whole, is not, however, an exclusively international one, i.e. one between Moscow and Kiev, but it is also an internal problem, because Crimea is actually home to a local separatism that invokes annexation to Moscow or the granting of very extended forms of self-government by the Kiev government. The issue has so far remained under control thanks to the “good will” of the parties involved. The Russian Duma has already several times declared invalid for unconstitutionality the 1954 decree that transferred Crimea to Ukraine, but until now this has never been formally ratified by the Russian president, who is well aware of how delicate the issue is. All we can do, therefore, is wait

and see how the situation evolves, under the watchful eye of the international community, (the EU and NATO in particular), which considers, and rightly so, this area crucial to safeguarding its security and its energy and geopolitical interests.